A QUESTION OF QUALITY

TO MY FRIENDS

THE MISSES HOWELL

OF

RHIEWPORT, BERRIEW, MONTGOMERYSHIRE

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK

E. M. A.

London, September, 1900.

A Question of Quality

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"Susannah and One Other,"
"Drusilla's Point of View,"
"The Strongest of All Things," etc.

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A QUESTION OF QUALITY

CHAPTER I

THE dressing gong had sounded. Its sonorous note had reached Christine's ears as she ran fleetly through a short cut of the grounds up to a side entrance. She was a little out of breath and had to stop once and tear off a portion of a lace flounce, but she was off again fleetly in a second; and when the house was reached she ran up by the servants' staircase and reached her own room unobserved. Once inside she flung herself into a chair for a few minutes. Her maid had everything prepared.

"I know I'm ever so late," said Christine when she had recovered her breath; "but I didn't like to leave Mrs. Bryne, poor old soul, she had so many questions to ask about the wedding, and of course that girl who is expected to look after her hadn't come back from the village. So I waited."

"And you've been running in those white satin shoes, too; why, they're wet through, Miss Christine."

"Are they?" said Christine indifferently. "Oh!—oh! Barker, I *am* so tired."

Barker responded to this quickly enough:

"And I should think you'd ought to be tired, miss: why, you were up this morning about five, and over at the doctor's doing things, till you hardly left yourself time to get into your bridesmaid's dress."

Christine Fielding laughed and gave a little sigh of fatigue at the same time.

"Well, anyhow, it went off very well, didn't it? Have you ever seen a prettier wedding or a prettier bride?"

"You'd best let me get you dressed, Miss Christine," answered Barker, "or would you like to have your dinner upstairs?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Miss Fielding. "I should have father telegraphing to all the specialists in London if I didn't go down to dinner. I wonder where he is? Perhaps he has wanted me. I know he had some letters that I ought to have written."

"The master can't expect you to do everything, Miss Christine."

And at this the girl laughed.

"Why—what do I do? Nothing! I'm the most disgracefully idle person of my acquaintance. Now then, Barker, get me out of this dress."

As she was standing brushing out her brown hair there came a fierce knocking at her door.

Christine turned and stood with a smile on her face.

"You can't come in," she called out.

A boy's voice answered her:

"The mater's been looking for you everywhere. Say, where *have* you been? Uncle Henry has been asking for you I don't know how many times."

Christine flew to the door and opened it.

"Has he really asked for me, Roger?"

"Honour bright!" said the boy. "We thought you were lost; and Sir George is fearfully huffy. You promised him a game of tennis before dinner."

"So I did," said Christine. "Oh! Roger, what on earth shall I say?"

"It doesn't matter about him much," said Roger; "but you might have thought of me."

Christine laughed, and rapped the top of his head with her brush.

"You're not the sort of person one forgets so easily, Mr. Roger," she said. "I say, be a dear, and go and ask Casson to keep dinner back a little while. I can't be ready just yet. Then, Roger, just go and find Daddy, and tell him I'll run into his room before dinner. He may want me for something."

"He's got somebody with him," said Roger.

"Somebody with him!" repeated Christine. "What sort of somebody?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know, all I know is that Casson said somebody had arrived on business."

Christine uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Really it's too bad," she said. "Surely they might give the poor man a little peace? I shall make him promise me faithfully that he won't let anyone in town know where he is when he comes down next time. Now, Roger, you must run. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

At this remark Roger laughed loudly.

"Ten minutes—ten hours you mean! I know what you women are when you get togging yourselves up."

"Go away, you rude little boy," said Christine, through a crack of the door. Then she shut it and laughed as she heard him whistling vigorously as he went down the passage.

"That young gentleman's growing up," remarked Barker sagely; adding, "his mother's going to have her hands full by and by."

"Oh! Peggy can manage more than one little schoolboy," observed Miss Fielding.

She shook her head as her maid brought forward a gown which had been lying on the bed.

"No; I won't put on that thing. Give me something cool, one of my old white dresses; Daddy always likes me in white."

Miss Fielding paused to look at herself in the long mirror just before leaving her room. She had done her hair very hurriedly, and was not too well pleased with the result, but there was no time to change it now.

"Am I very untidy?" she asked Barker, and Barker answered shortly:

"You'll do, miss."

Just pausing to pick up her gloves and a fan the girl went out into the passage, and then she ran down the wide old oaken staircase and paused when she came to the landing where it divided into two. A woman was sitting on a deep, comfortable couch in the recess formed by the division of the staircase. A book was on her knee, but she was not reading. Christine bent over the railing

and dropped one of her gloves on to the open pages of the book.

"Hallo, there!" she said with a laugh in her voice. "Where *have* you been, Peggy, all this time?"

Her cousin turned and looked up at her. She was the mother of the schoolboy and there was a distinct resemblance between them.

"Where have *I* been?" she exclaimed. "Well, I like that! Do you know we nearly sent over to the nearest town to hire its crier? Have you been staying to comfort the bride's father and mother all this time?"

"No," said Christine. "I thought it better to leave Mrs. Brathmore to herself for a little while. Besides you know I made her promise to bring the doctor to dinner to-night. It will be more cheery for them than being alone."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Dudworth as she closed her book. "So there is to be some dinner?"

"Did you doubt it? Are you hungry?"

"Hungry! I'm simply famished! Besides, what is there to do in the country if one doesn't eat?"

Christine ran down the stairs and sat on the couch beside her cousin.

"Peggy," she said, "you are almost as greedy as your son."

"Roger shall pay you out for that remark," said Mrs. Dudworth. She was really rather short-sighted, and she screwed up her eyes now and looked at Christine. She always liked looking at Christine. It was not that the girl was simply pretty, she had a

more potent charm than that. Her movements were indescribably graceful, and one was conscious always of a sense of delicacy, that innate refinement which clings to some personalities like a fragrance. And yet, young, slim, childlike and sensitively delicate as she was, there were indications in Christine Fielding's face of strength, a reposeful strength not customary in one of her years, a strength born of mental gravity, of deep and unusual thought, and in a minor degree of that element of self-sufficiency which comes perhaps naturally when a life is lived very much alone, as Christine's life was. To Margaret Dudworth there was definite beauty in the oval face of the girl, with its clear, healthy pallor and its rare grey eyes and warm red mouth.

"George Narborough has been wandering about looking everywhere for you," she said. "He sat with me a little while under the trees, and I tried to console him, but I wasn't very successful."

A little warm colour crept into Christine's face for an instant.

"I am so sorry," she said; "I am afraid Sir George will think me a poor sort of hostess, but I had to give old Mrs. Byrne a full description of the wedding, and take her her share of the cake and flowers. And she wanted to know everything, of course, poor old soul! I believe I have been talking for nearly two hours."

"You will miss Enid Brathmore, won't you?" Mrs. Dudworth said.

And Christine nodded her head.

"Very, very much. She has really been my

only girl-friend, and when I realize that she has gone I feel a little sorry for myself."

"I wish," said Margaret Dudworth in a spontaneous way, "that you would make haste and follow her example."

Christine laughed, but she blushed again, this time a little more decidedly than before.

"Silly Peggy!" she said. "Whom shall I marry? Roger won't have me, and then you know I am never going to leave my Daddy? Do you suppose that I should ever be happy anywhere but with him? Peggy, isn't it lovely sitting here? The hall is so beautiful in this light."

Mrs. Dudworth lay back and looked about her. Glance where she might she saw nothing but that which was purest in art. Hunston Manor had been beautiful in itself when Henry Fielding had bought it many years ago to be the home of his young wife. His marriage had been a romantic one. Elizabeth Fielding had been a governess when fate had thrown her in the pathway of a man who even then was beginning to be regarded as a giant in the world of finance. They had made their home in the country, for Mrs. Fielding had cared only for tranquil simple things, the world with its rush and excitement held no charm for her. And as her slightest wish had been law to Henry Fielding, and at that time the old Manor-house and estate of Hunston happened to come into the market, he had at once paid the big purchase price and had established his wife as mistress of a home, the very walls of which seemed eloquent of poetry and romance. Here Christine, their only child, had been born, and here the young

mother, the adored wife, had slipped away from the tender, passionate love which had been lavished upon her. This loss had been actually the first bleak experience in Henry Fielding's unprecedented career of success, and it was a grief which never faded. Even now, years after she had been laid in her grave, Christine never dared mention her mother's name to her father, despite the close and tender sympathy which existed between them.

Henry Fielding was a man now of immense wealth. He was a man of power. Nothing marked more surely, to Margaret Dudworth at least, the very remarkable characteristics of this man (self-made and rising, so it was asserted, from the humblest circumstances) than the atmosphere of his home life. As in his appearance he was a singularly handsome, and refined man, so in his home, there was no ostentation, none of that conscious revelation of vulgarity and ignorance which so frequently hovers about the pathway of those who have amassed money as Fielding had amassed his. He possessed in the rarest degree, critical judgment and a perfection of taste, but more than this he evinced a pronounced individuality in his worship of the beautiful.

They were not merely treasures of olden times, glorious relics of other generations, which had found their way to Hunston. The low-walled rooms were gemmed with works of genius, efforts of modern hands, some of which might have perished unrecognized if chance or destiny had not brought them across Mr. Fielding's path.

A portrait of himself by one of these modern

masters hung above the high carved fireplace of the hall, and Christine turned now to look at her father's picture. She loved him with a love that was immeasurable, having its root in admiration, reverence, and devotion. She knew that he had a great name, a great place in the world of finance, but she was convinced that no one knew his real greatness as she did.

Mrs. Dudworth put down her eye-glasses after a while.

"Decidedly it is a pretty place, and everything is very nice," she said; "but I want my dinner."

And Christine woke out of her dreams.

"Peggy, you are hopeless!"

Mrs. Dudworth half closed her eyes.

"Man cannot live by pictures alone, nor by tapestry; neither can he eat old furniture—I want my dinner! Distinctly and definitely I want my dinner!"

"Well, if that is the case you must have your dinner, I suppose."

Christine got up, and at that moment the butler moved across the hall and a young man sauntered leisurely down the staircase.

"Casson, it seems that Mrs. Dudworth is very hungry, and it really is getting very late. Is there no sign of the doctor and Mrs. Brathmore?" asked Miss Fielding as the butler turned on some of the lights.

"The fly has just turned in at the lower gate, miss," the butler answered.

"Then we will have dinner at once, please," said Miss Fielding.

The butler, however, with a deprecating manner, found this impossible.

"I thought perhaps you'd rather wait, miss. The gentleman is still with Mr. Fielding."

Christine frowned slightly.

"Of course we will wait. Peggy, where is Roger?"

"I don't know," said Roger's mother placidly; "but I suspect he is trying to make himself extraordinarily beautiful for your sake."

"Oh!" said Christine with a laugh and a glance up at the staircase down which Sir George Narborough was slowly descending, "Roger has thrown me over. I am despised and rejected. He was going on anyhow this afternoon with that big Coniston girl. She quite cut me out, didn't she, Sir George? So sorry to keep you waiting for dinner. It isn't really my fault."

She turned towards the open doorway, and Narborough followed her.

"I have a grievance," he said in a low voice; "you promised me a game of tennis this late afternoon. I waited for you, but you never came."

"I am afraid I forgot all about my promise," said Christine frankly. "I'm awfully sorry, Sir George; but the fact is everything has been confused with me to-day. Weddings are great events down here. I have neglected all sorts of little duties I ought to have done. For instance, I know my father had a number of letters he wanted me to write. He has two secretaries in town, but when he is here I do their work. Isn't the breeze deli-

cious? In a little while the moon will rise and the night will be so beautiful."

She was speaking rapidly because she became nervously conscious of the fact that the man beside her was looking at her very steadily. This sense of self-consciousness, of lack of ease was new to Christine. She moved away a step or two, then she looked back over her shoulder.

"Peggy, you shall eat at last! The Brathmores have come." And running down the steps she went to meet her friends as the cab drew up.

With a slight shrug of the shoulders and a frown of impatience Sir George walked back into the hall. Mrs. Dudworth glanced at him with a half quizzical expression in her charming eyes, but he did not seem inclined to be sociable. Standing by one of the tables he picked up one of the evening papers and began to read it. The experience of being put into the back-ground stung the man: it was not the first time since he had been at Hunston that he felt out of his element.

There was certainly very little to interest him in the few people he met here. He liked Margaret Dudworth, of course: they were old friends, but she always imbued him with the idea that she understood him just a little too clearly; and though she had been instrumental in introducing him to the Fieldings he was by no means sure whether she was wholly in sympathy with his intentions. Not that this really troubled him. When he made up his mind to any given thing, in any given direction, he usually carried through any plans he might make for the achievement of the desired object. At the

present instance he had sacrificed several excellent grouse-shooting engagements purely to prolong his stay at Hunston Manor sufficiently to bring about an intimate friendship between Henry Fielding's daughter and himself.

Sir George Narborough had accepted Mrs. Dudworth's invitation to Hunston Manor with the complacent condescension of showing an amiable spirit. Because, although Mr. Fielding was, of course, a great person in the City, he really had no social standing, neither was he the sort of man with whom Sir George as a rule fraternized. Narborough had prepared himself for the usual elements which characterize the environment, as a general rule, of a self-made man, but Henry Fielding had proved a surprising and an agreeable experience, both as regarded himself and his surroundings. Sir George found himself more than once at a disadvantage when the desultory after-dinner chat turned into political channels, or when matters of art or science were discussed. He really could find no fault with his host and from the first had given a real touch of homage to the girl who ruled in her father's house. Indeed, a little paradoxically, Narborough rather resented the simple unpretentious yet dignified life lived by Henry Fielding and his daughter.

In his opinion the simplicity in the Hunston menage was rather ridiculous.

Mrs. Dudworth had roused Sir George's curiosity in the girl.

"She goes nowhere, she knows really no one. I don't think she has the least idea how rich she is going to be," Mrs. Dudworth had confided to him

"She only has one hobby, one source of happiness—I was almost going to say one expression of religion—and that exists in her devotion to her father. She does not love Henry in the ordinary sense of the word, she reverences him."

"Rather unusual!" Sir George had said, and Mrs. Dudworth had replied emphatically:

"Very. But what I feel about the matter is this: there is no earthly reason why the girl should not love her father in this way except that Henry like the rest of us is mortal, and what would become of Christine, what her future would be without her father, I can't begin to imagine! So I want to put her into a fresh groove. I want to interest her and to detach her nature from this single ideal, and Henry is with me in this. Now you understand why he has asked me to bring people to Hunston. Christine's outlook must be broadened gradually."

Sir George Narborough had smiled to himself when he had met Christine Fielding. She had seemed to him so young. To detach such a girl's romantic emotions from her father, and attach them to himself, had appeared the easiest task in the world; but to-night, after three-weeks' stay, he felt he had made a mistake in his judgment. He was no nearer understanding Henry Fielding's daughter now than he had been in the first moment of meeting her.

It mortified him beyond expression to have to confess to himself that he had made such singularly little impression on his young hostess.

Narborough was just an ordinary man: there was nothing subtle in his mental construction, nor

was he very intelligent. He had his proper share of vanity, however, and a supreme belief in himself and in the rules of life which he had written to suit himself. By one of the best used of these rules, Miss Fielding should have arrived at the tender stage of a flirtation with himself after three weeks of pleasant intimacy. Yet, though he had been at Hunston for more than three weeks, he had scarcely begun to beat down the barrier of polite indifference which attends on mere acquaintanceship. It annoyed him now to watch Christine fussing affectionately over Mrs. Brathmore and her husband: her genuine interest in such common-place people only emphasized the fact of her lack of interest in himself. Really, he did not understand her. In truth, Narborough was vexed with himself for remaining, and yet obstinately enough he determined not to go till he had brought matters to a more satisfactory point—one which would lead to future development, if not to an immediate triumph.

The arrival of Roger Dudworth sliding down the banisters caused a little diversion.

"Roger!" cried out Mrs. Dudworth, really alarmed. "How many times must I tell you not to do that? I always expect to see you land on your head."

"That's about the safest thing he could do," said Narborough throwing down the newspaper. "You know what they say about an Irishman's skull."

"Why you're Irish yourself," retorted the boy, and Mrs. Dudworth broke in with a laugh:

"Oh no, he isn't! All the Celt was civilized

out of him long ago." Then she called to Christine. "Dinner!" she said, "dinner—dinner—dinner!"

Christine turned.

"Really I am awfully sorry," she said. "Look here, I think I'll go and see what is keeping Daddy."

Roger put himself forward.

"Let me go, Chris," he said.

But Christine shook her head.

"No, I'll go. He won't mind me. It is really too bad of anybody coming on business at this time of day, or rather night. Why not all go in, Peggy dear? Daddy and I will join you directly."

But Mrs. Dudworth shook her head.

"Oh, no, we'll wait of course."

Christine slipped through the hall, down the passage that led towards the back of the house. Her father's study was on the ground floor—a large, long room with oak panelling and thick beams across the low roof. There was a green baize door closing over the oak one which gave admittance to the room, and as she paused before opening these double doors Christine heard the sound of someone within speaking distinctly: the voice was rough and loud. There was something menacing in the sound of that voice, something which awakened a quick and curious sense of fear.

Christine only paused an instant, however; then, slipping through the green baize door, she turned the handle and entered the room. She did not advance immediately. The windows were thrown open; she could feel the fresh night air, the scent of the flowers in the gardens stole softly to her. The only light in the room came from the reading lamp on the

table, and this light within the green shade centred in circumscribed fashion on the table. It was clear enough, however, for Christine Fielding to see her father's face, and as she looked at him she winced, as with sudden physical suffering. He did not see her, apparently he had not heard her enter. He was standing with his head bent and his hands hanging by his side.

Christine heard him speaking in a low, nervous voice, and one sentence came clearly to the girl's ear: "I have said there shall be restitution, full and complete restitution. Everything shall be done that——" Christine closed the door and moved rapidly forward into the room.

The sight of her father, so beloved, so revered, actually cringing before this other man sent a pain like a knife-thrust through the girl's heart. There was a strong maternal element mingling in with the filial love Christine cherished for her father; and now, as she realized the amazing fact that she was a witness to a suffering which was coloured with humiliation, she was conscious really of only one feeling, and that was to protect him if possible. In a vague way she realized that the man standing in front of her father had turned and was looking at her as she came rapidly forward.

"Father!" said Christine.

Henry Fielding turned sharply, and as he saw the girl standing there closely to him he seemed to shrink from her. Then he looked at the other man. There was something abject in his movement, in his voice a pleading note.

"My daughter," he said

The man to whom he spoke made no movement. He only stared deliberately at the slim, white-robed figure; and Christine in her turn looked back at him deliberately.

She saw that he was tall and strong, having the look of a sea-faring man. His clothes were shabby and common. One of his hands rested on the back of a chair, and it was a powerful hand. His hair was tinged with grey, yet the face was the face of a young man.

For an instant the intolerable pain, the suffocating sensation brought by this unexpected and tragic moment mastered Christine, and there came upon her a new sense of fear. For just as she realized the pitiless strength of this strange man whom she confronted, so intangibly and yet most definitely, the sense of her father's feebleness came to her significantly.

It was only for the space of an instant or so that Christine and this man looked at one another, then he spoke:

"You'd best send your daughter away," he said. "She might hear something she wouldn't like to hear."

Henry Fielding put his hand on Christine's shoulder.

"Go—go, my dearest. I beg of you to leave me, Christine. I command you to go."

The girl bit her quivering lip, and then she turned and almost passionately she kissed the hand resting on her shoulder. Though her heart was full almost beyond endurance she obeyed him implicitly. Turning, she walked back not to

the door this time, but to the long open windows, and passing out she seemed to melt into the grey mist of the twilight beyond.

For a few minutes the girl wandered she hardly knew where, only the knowledge that she must control herself, that she must go back to the others, that she must let no one see, if possible, any change in her; only the conviction that her father would rely upon her to do this, gave her courage to subdue the hysterical longing to break down and shed tears. And in a little while she felt she might venture to return to the hall. How she restrained herself from weeping she could not have told. She only knew that the necessity, the vital necessity, of controlling herself was paramount with her. As she walked towards the house she trembled, however, for her nerves were shaken, and there was a dreadful foreboding in her heart. In this strange moment she awakened to the realization that it is not only in great things that sacrifice is demanded of a great love!

CHAPTER II

SIR GEORGE NARBOROUGH met Christine as she came slowly along the corridor from the garden.

"Peggy has sent me to find you," he said. "She is afraid that you will vanish again."

"I was just coming," Christine answered. "Sir George, will you please take in Mrs. Brathmore? My father will join us as soon as he can. I am sorry; you must be starving. It is—it is now nearly nine o'clock."

"All right," said Narborough.

He looked at her sharply and noticed at once that something was wrong, and that she was making a marvellous effort at self-control.

As they advanced into the light he saw her lips tremble and he caught the glint of tears on her lashes. This new aspect of her pleased him. He could not even pretend to guess at the cause of her annoyance or her agitation, but the fact of it was decidedly interesting, even stimulating.

As they joined the others and stood a moment waiting for Casson to announce dinner, Roger Dudworth approached Christine.

"I say, Chris, what's up?" the boy asked bluntly.

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"You look most awfully blue! Has someone been stealing Cousin Henry?"

Sir George moved up sharply behind the boy and pinched his ear. Roger immediately and delightedly began to spar with him, whilst Mrs. Dudworth glanced at the girl quickly.

"Shall we all go in? Sir George, please don't hurt my baby."

The boy was furious.

"Hurt me! I say, mater, I'm not china, you know; I shan't break."

"I don't know what you're made of, but I know you're hungry. Come in and eat," said his mother; and Mrs. Dudworth led the way herself into the dining-room as she spoke.

Her kinship with Christine was really not very close, but the girl had grown up regarding her almost as she would have regarded an elder sister: indeed, Margaret Dudworth had been one of the few who had had an intimate footing in the Fielding's household from the beginning. She was his wife's second cousin, and Henry Fielding had a very sincere regard and admiration for this alert, amusing, interesting and happy woman. Although a widow, Mrs. Dudworth frankly confessed that she was a happy woman; just as she confessed in the same frank way that her marriage with the man old enough to be her father had been a matter arranged by her parents and not one of inclination. She was sincerely attached to Henry Fielding, whose friendship with herself and her boy she had good reason to prize, and she loved Christine very, very dearly. She knew now that

something had gone wrong, so she flung herself into the breach, and, thanks to her merry chatter and brisk, tactful manner, she manœuvred to keep the attention of the others away from Christine.

In her eager efforts to help the girl, Mrs. Dudworth found herself ably seconded by Sir George Narborough, who had rarely shown himself in such a pleasant mood.

Dinner was nearly over when the door opened and Mr. Fielding came in.

Christine almost rose from her seat as she saw him. It cost her an enormous effort to sit still and not to run to him and put her arms about him, and as if understanding this Henry Fielding stood just an instant behind her chair, and, stooping, he kissed her tenderly.

"A thousand apologies," he said. "I am so sorry I was detained."

He passed on and sat in his usual seat, and as she saw him begin to smile and chat and eat his dinner unconcernedly, Christine's heart dropped again to its usual beat. Her lips began to lose their pallor, and the strained expression went from her eyes.

It was not possible that the strange episode which she had witnessed could be driven out of her memory so quickly, nor that her anxiety, which had been swept to such a tragic point, could be wholly set aside just because her father seemed to be himself again; and yet the girl most naturally snatched at the comfort which her father's quiet expression suggested.

She had not even attempted as yet to try and

understand the meaning of the words which she had overheard; but as she sat looking at Henry Fielding, every now and then and as that pang of misery, of fear, of most bewildering doubt loosened, she began unconsciously to seek for some explanation of it all. And it seemed to her that a probable translation of the whole affair might be that the strange, rough man with his burning accusative eyes and contemptuous lips had been just one of those cranks who infest the lives of the very rich. Through her father's secretaries, Christine had heard that Mr. Fielding was beset by beggars and claimants for charity of every description.

It was true this particular man had not looked exactly as if he were begging; his manner had really been too aggressive, too insolent for that: nevertheless, Christine, like many others, grasped at the faintest shadow of an excuse to satisfy herself that the nameless fears which had chased themselves through her brain had no real cause for existence.

Mrs. Dudworth caught herself looking from time to time at Henry Fielding. She detected a change in the man's expression, though it was of so elusive a nature she would have found it difficult to have defined. Naturally, she was a little curious to account for what had happened, for in all the years she had known Christine she had never before seen the girl with a shadow on her face, nor the faintest suggestion of trouble in her eyes. But as a gracious and kindly woman, one blessed with more than the usual share of discrimination and tact, she had not the least intention of letting anyone know that she

saw anything out of the ordinary. Fortunately, Mrs. Brathmore was still so absorbed in the exciting details of her daughter's wedding that the conversation was devoted entirely to this subject, and Roger was kept away from any dangerous interruptions by Sir George, who teased the boy unmercifully. Mrs. Dudworth was consciously grateful to the young man.

When dinner was over she proposed coffee outside.

"There is a heavenly moon, and I feel romantically inclined—at least, I shall be romantic when my son has disappeared. Roger, bed time."

"Oh! I say, mater," grumbled Roger, whose years did not number more than eleven. "Oh! I say, you might let a fellow have a little bit of a look in."

"Look in," said Sir George cheerily. "Tuck up, you mean. Now then, my son, up you go;" and picking up the boy quite easily, he carried him to the foot of the staircase, and then chased him to the first landing, from whence those below heard a fine scrimmage ensue.

Christine was standing with her hands slipped through her father's arm. She noticed that he laughed quite easily and seemed thoroughly to enjoy the nonsense of the moment.

Sir George came running down a little out of breath, in a few moments, and then went boldly up to Christine.

"Miss Fielding," he said, "you broke one promise this afternoon, now you really mustn't break another."

"Did I give you another promise?" asked Christine.

She was clinging to her father's arm. She felt that she could not let him go.

"Yes," said Sir George, "you promised to let me row you on the river in the moonlight, and please, I want to do it. Don't you think, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Fielding, "it will do Miss Fielding good?"

Henry Fielding assented half eagerly.

"Will *you* come, darling?" Christine asked her father.

He bent and kissed her on the brow.

"Not to-night, dear," he said. "I'm going to sit on the lawn with Peggy."

"Christine, you must have a wrap," said Mrs. Dudworth, hurriedly. Sir George picked up a scarf from the inner hall, and Christine walked slowly out of the house into the gardens. She had not the least desire to go on the river. All she craved to do was to stay near her father, but with that delicate sympathy which pervaded her every thought where he was concerned, she felt intuitively that her father wished her to go with Sir George; desired everything to be natural and normal.

The doctor and his wife had started homewards immediately after dinner.

When they reached some chairs placed under the trees at the end of the lawn, Mr. Fielding and Mrs. Dudworth sat down. Christine still lingered.

"I want to stay with you, Daddy," she said. She spoke so low that only her father heard.

He held her hand very closely and then released it.

"I'll wait for you," he said. "Go, dear one. Take care of her," he added, and he spoke to George Narborough.

Sir George laughed softly.

"Yes, I will take care of her—if she will let me," he said, and as Christine and he moved away, he added very softly: "I hope you are not afraid to trust yourself to me?"

"No, I am not afraid," Christine said. But she answered him unconsciously; her thoughts were not with him.

* * * * * *

Henry Fielding sat and watched his girl walk slowly away until a descent in the ground hid her from his sight. Then he put himself back in his chair with a little sigh, and Mrs. Dudworth spoke:

"Roger tells me you have ordered him a gun, and promised that one of the keepers shall show him how to use it. You are much too good to him, Henry!"

Fielding did not answer at first; then he said:

"On the contrary, it is I who have to thank Roger. It has done me endless good to feel the boy's happy spirit about this quiet old place, and I know Christine loves having him here. Are all the Eton arrangements completed, Peggy?"

"Yes."

"He will be in the house you wanted?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Dudworth a second time.

"I was half afraid I should have had to abandon the idea of Eton, but you were the good fairy who made this possible, as you have made so many other things possible, Henry!"

Henry Fielding shut his eyes for an instant.

"You were very dear to Beth, and you have grown dear to me, Peggy," he said in a low voice. With a scarcely perceptible pause he added, "There are so few who have to thank me for goodness!"

"Few?"

He laughed.

"A man does not reach my position without exacting a heavy toll of suffering; to be a successful business man, one must have a brain of steel and a heart of iron. I don't suppose it has ever occurred to you, Peggy, to wonder how I have reached to where I now stand."

"I'm afraid I am an awful fool in business matters," Margaret Dudworth said apologetically.

"One does not need great or special qualifications to be able to define the methods by which the prosperous become rich as a general rule, and the rich very rich. I sometimes fancy, however, that your friend Narborough could enlighten you. Why did you bring him here, Peggy?"

The question was put abruptly, and woman-like, Mrs. Dudworth answered it with another: "Don't you like him?" Without waiting for a reply, she spoke on hurriedly: "You remember we agreed it would be a good thing if I were to invite odds and ends of people to Hunston, to bring the world to Christine since she will not go to the world. So

I thought of the Chaplins, who left us last week. Christine did not care very much about them, by the way, and I had an idea George Narborough would be an agreeable acquaintance."

"I understand he has no money?"

"He is not rich, but he is not a pauper. I believe George has political ambitions. His mother is an old friend of mine, and I have known him since he was a boy."

Mr. Fielding moved in his chair restlessly. "I saw when I came down last time which way the land lay with him, and I was quite prepared to hear that Sir George had proposed marriage to Christine."

Mrs. Dudworth felt her heart beat a little quickly.

"You—you would not object to this, Henry?"

Mr. Fielding did not answer immediately; he sat with his hand covering his eyes for a moment.

"I suppose it would be a good marriage for Christine? I mean, that it would give her a secure position in a social sense?"

The woman in the other chair looked at him with some surprise and curiosity.

"Oh! yes," she said. "George Narborough is all right. His mother was a daughter of old Lord Ryeford. I must confess, Henry, I really had no matrimonial manœuvres in my mind; in fact, I asked George here only because I had intended to have had several others, and he is popular in a way. If it annoys you to realize that he admires Christine——"

"It does not annoy me," said Mr. Fielding. He caught his breath sharply, as though he sighed.

Mrs. Dudworth peered at him in her short-sighted way.

"Are you not well to-night, Henry? You sound rather tired."

"I am tired," he answered; "tired out, Peggy."

"Then why on earth don't you be done with business? You have worked long enough, goodness knows!" said Mrs. Dudworth in her downright way; "why go on slaving? Is it worth it? Surely you have enough to live on—enough to ensure you a comfortable old age?"

Henry Fielding made no answer for a moment, and then he said with a curious note:

"*If Narborough is in earnest, there is no need* to wait."

Mrs. Dudworth glanced at him again.

"Well, you had better propose for him. I believe George is only waiting for his chance; his intentions are obvious enough, at least to me. It is Christine who holds him back. Perhaps if she knows it is your wish that she should marry, she will marry. You can control her absolutely; she lives for nothing but to give you pleasure."

The man leaned forward with his clasped hands between his knees.

"I know it—I know—it—it is one of my griefs," he said. He spoke with unutterable sadness, and the woman beside him felt her heart thrill. But she showed no emotion as she spoke on:

"Decidedly you are out of gear to-night, Henry. Believe me it will have to be a rest, and a good long one too; otherwise—well! I won't

croak, but you can fill in the rest of the picture yourself, I daresay."

Again there was silence.

Christine's father sat looking far, far away across the meadows and the river, to where the hills stood. Their summits were lost in mist, and the moonlight shining on them increased that element of solitariness which nature can produce so forcibly at times. This feeling was heavy on the man's heart now.

"It is a beautiful night," he said, after a long pause; "and the world is very wonderful. To-night, Margaret, out here we seem very close to Heaven! I have so long studied and worshipped the handiwork of man that God's kingdom and His creatures have been well-nigh forgotten. It is long since I realized the beauty of nature. Now I remember it was just such a night as this when Christine was born——"

Casson, the butler, was seen advancing across the lawn, and his voice broke on the silence which followed:

"The motor is waiting, sir, and I have put your things in the car—you'll just have time to reach the station."

As Henry Fielding got out of his chair quickly, Mrs. Dudworth rose too.

"You are going away again, Henry? To-night? Does Christine know?" Her tone was surprise itself.

He shook his head.

"Tell her I shall be back—in a day or two—in any case as quickly as I can—and then tell

her—I will leave her no more for awhile—we'll have our long-promised holiday and you will stay with us, Peggy? That is if you are not weary of this quiet place, my Beth's loved home!"

"I never tire of Hunston, you know that," Margaret Dudworth said, in a subdued voice. She ceased to urge him, but as she went to the house with him there was a great sensation of uneasiness troubling her. She felt, too, a sort of disloyalty to Christine. It was not like Henry Fielding to go away without seeing his girl, without the blessing of her parting kiss, but when she spoke of sending for Christine the father shook his head.

"Leave her—it will not be for long, and perhaps she is happy out in the moonlight with him."

As he stood by the motor Henry Fielding put out his hand.

"Don't let the child fret, Peggy. Tell her it is duty which takes me away again so soon. Tell her my heart stays here. Tell her I love her more dearly than man ever loved child before. Say——"

He broke off abruptly, turned away and got into the car; a moment later he was out of sight.

Mrs. Dudworth dashed some tears from her eyes.

"Your master is overdoing it, Casson," she said, speaking on impulse to the butler beside her. "I think he is very ill even now. Don't you think he is looking very badly?"

The servant stood hesitating a moment, and then he said, in his approved deprecating fashion:

"I don't see any difference in Mr. Fielding, ma'am. I think he looks just as usual."

His manner was almost reproving in its matter-of-fact tone, and against herself Mrs. Dudworth smiled, feeling comforted.

"No doubt Casson is right, and I am nothing but a fanciful old woman," she said to herself as she went indoors.

CHAPTER III

SIR GEORGE and Christine walked in silence down the slope of the lawn till they reached the boat-house. As he pushed open the door he paused. Christine was standing half listlessly looking out on the moonlit river.

"I'm sorry to have made you so fearfully cross, Miss Fielding," Narborough said.

Christine turned sharply and he saw that she answered him with an effort.

"I am not cross."

"At least you are bored. You find me a nuisance?"

"Why do you imagine ridiculous things?"

There was just a touch of impatience in the girl's voice.

Sir George answered her smoothly.

"I have made a mistake. I am glad."

As they passed into the house he busied himself in untying and launching one of the boats.

Christine suggested that they should find the man who had care of the boats, but he refused this.

"I don't want anyone. I like to think I am

waiting on you, even in a pretended sort of way."

When all was ready he stretched out his hand, steadying himself with one foot on the steps and helped Christine into the boat; then he pushed the little craft gently from under the shelter of the boat-house out on to the glittering river.

"Which shall it be? up or down stream?" he asked; and when the girl answered in that same listless way that she had no choice, he declared coolly that she must decide. "And you are going to talk to me, too," he added; "this is my opportunity, and I mean to make the most of it."

His masterfulness stirred Christine pleasantly.

"I am afraid I am dreadfully dull to-night, Sir George," she said apologetically.

"Not dull," he corrected her as they turned against the stream and he began to scull in an even and workmanlike fashion, "just a little unapproachable shall we say? But that is your normal state—at least, with me."

"How well you row," Christine said hurriedly.

He disturbed her. She had been vexed with him a few moments before, but now her vexation had gone.

"I have a fancy to talk about you—the real you, I mean," the young man said evenly. He was keeping his eyes on her, all the time pleasantly conscious that she moved restlessly under that very steady and significant gaze. "I expect you have wondered every now and then, haven't you, how much longer I was going to stay here?"

"No," said Christine truthfully, "I have never

thought about it. Of course I mean," she amended hurriedly, "that I am glad you have cared to stay with us. Peggy said before you came that she did not fancy you would waste much time on us."

The man laughed. "And for once, you see, Peggy was out of her reckoning."

The stream was not very strong, and the sculls, in his capable, sure hands, dipped lightly in and out of the water and swept the little boat quickly away from the landing place. Christine drew in her breath quickly once or twice. She steered in a mechanical way. The fresh night air was very soothing; it gave her a sense of calm; it seemed to her as if she were drifting swiftly away from that sharp hour of suffering. The bewilderment, the apprehension, floated from her on the wings of this cool night wind.

The man was watching her carefully. She had a transparent face, and the moon's light was strong and clear. He found her definitely attractive; her very aloofness, that sense of being out of his reach, would have constituted a charm if even she had failed to appeal to him more tangibly. As it was, to-night this appeal was so real that he was strung up to force the situation, to put an end to an uncertainty which was more than irritating.

Christine's mood was harmonious with his intentions. He did not disguise from himself that she lay as yet outside the barest suggestion of sentiment, but she was not as she had been. Every now and then he saw her lip tremble, and caught the sound of a faint sigh: little signs, perhaps, but

hopeful ones. He left her for a while in silence, and Christine rested back against the soft cushions, content to be silent.

She closed her eyes once for a long while, and when she opened them she saw that Sir George had ceased rowing and that the stream was carrying them down the river again. The water rippled and lapped and gurgled musically under the sides of the boat and over the flat blades of the sculls.

"Are you tired?" Narborough asked her as she sat forward.

"I think I am—a little."

He guided the boat into midstream with his right hand and then let it drift again whilst he sat looking at Christine.

"I am convinced you are fretting, Miss Fielding," he said, waiting a little while before he spoke. "I wish you would tell me what is worrying you?"

Christine started.

"I—I am not fretting exactly," she said; "I was only thinking."

"About your father?"

She nodded her head.

"There is nothing the matter with Mr. Fielding," Sir George said. "You must keep him down here as long as possible. Town is unbearable in this heat."

"I wish I could keep him here always," the girl said, and the passion with which she said this surprised and stung the man to whom she spoke.

"I wonder if you know how cruel you are," Narborough said suddenly.

Christine looked at him.

"*Cruel!*"

"*Yes,*" *he answered.* "*You are so self-engrossed* you have not a thought to give to anyone who, like myself, is unfortunate enough to be outside your intimate life."

Christine still looked at him.

"I am sorry," she began in a slightly bewildered way, and then she blushed, and that same vague uneasiness which had troubled her when they had stood together just for a moment before dinner came back to her. "I think we ought to land now," she said. "Daddy will wonder where I am. Sir George, it must be very late! Oh! please let us go back now."

"Do you want to go in?" the young man added; he was looking at her in the same steady fashion as he spoke, and Christine felt that strange disquietude deeper in her heart, and a curious magnetic sensation creep over her, holding her as it were in a spell.

She did not answer, but let her head fall back on the cushions, and closed her eyes for a little while. When she opened them he was rowing again. The moonlight was very beautiful—the ripples on the water, as the sculls dipped and came up fringed with diamonds, fascinated her, but this soft, far-away sensation was sweetest of all; this kind of dream which had no kinship with sleep.

"I wish we could stay out here for ever," Narborough said suddenly, and there was passion in his voice; he shipped his sculls, they were close to the boat-house again, and with a deft hand he swung the boat round and drew it under the shelter.

When he had fastened it securely he went forward and drew her to her feet. A wave of honest emotion possessed him at this moment. The girl herself, and nothing but herself, had sway with him just for this moment at least. "Christine," he murmured pleadingly.

The girl, startled, made no movement of withdrawal. The grip of his hands gave her a wonderful sense of pleasure. There was something masterful about him, something which drew her to him. She put her hands in his, and as he steadied the boat he lifted her from it on to the steps, and for an instant held her very closely to him.

"Christine—I love you," he said, "I love you."

Once again her eyes closed; unconsciously she rested against him, and bending over her he kissed her.

* * * * * *

Mrs. Dudworth was reading in the hall when they went in.

"Nice goings on," she observed. "Have you the least idea what time it is? I thought not. Why, even the moon is thinking of bed!"

She was eyeing them cautiously; short-sighted as she was she could see clearly enough to discern the complacent expression on the man's face.

"The doctor and Mrs. Brathmore went home long ago, as you know; moonlight and midnight were too much for them, and your father has left a message for you," she said with a little hesitation.

Christine spoke shyly—eagerly.

"Oh! Peggy, has he gone upstairs—so soon?"

Mrs. Dudworth got up with a pretended yawn.

"He has gone to catch some train to carry him to London; he will be back again in two days' time."

Christine stood transfixed for a moment, then she flung out her hands suddenly, and crossing over to the sofa she threw herself down on it, burying her face in the cushions.

"My dear child!" said Mrs. Dudworth, almost reproachfully; but Narborough interposed authoritatively.

"Leave her to me," he said. He went over to the girl and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Christine, my dearest," he said.

Mrs. Dudworth caught her breath and turned aside. She did not often shed tears, but she felt her eyes wet now.

Christine moved at his touch, and sat round.

"Gone!" she said in a dull, stupefied voice. "Left me!" Then a great cry broke from her heart. "Oh, God! Why did I not see him again—just once again before he went?"

Sir George frowned sharply; he had a horror of scenes or emotional outbursts at all times.

"Your father will be back to-morrow, darling," Mrs. Dudworth said eagerly; "or the next day at latest; he burdened me with messages for you. He is coming back to start his holiday. He has never loved you so much." She broke off and then said very quietly: "Casson tells me Henry has left a note for you; it is in your room."

Christine got up and stood with her hands pressed to her heart; then she moved slowly, feebly al

most, to the staircase. Sir George went with her, and would have accompanied her upstairs, but she asked him to leave her.

"I must be alone—please—*please*—I must be alone." The man frowned and all complacency went from his expression. He drew back at once, of course, but he did it with an ill-will. His vanity was sharply piqued, and his anger as sharply aroused. The knowledge that Henry Fielding still held first place was mortifying in the extreme. He intended to let Christine know, and that quickly, that he had no intention of sharing with anyone, not even with her father. On this point he was very firm.

Mrs. Dudworth made no effort to discuss matters with Sir George, who had lit the inevitable cigarette. With a lightly spoken "Good-night" she followed Christine upstairs. At the door of the girl's room she paused, and once she thought of knocking, then she passed on to her own room. Christine locked her door, and then went forward hurriedly to look for her father's letter. She stood with closed eyes the space of several minutes with the letter pressed to her lips, then she sat down and opened the envelope.

"My beloved child—" Henry Fielding had written,—"It grieves me to leave you again so soon, but my unexpected visitor of this evening brought with him certain claims of business which necessitate immediate attention. I shall hope to run away from town again in a day or two, and then you shall have your old father all to yourself

for some time; perhaps a long time. Now—once again I leave you custodian of all—make excuses for me to Sir George Narborough, and above all be happy! I love to think you are happy. My memories of you in this dear old home are the gleams of sunlight which help me through many heavy hours. Good-night. God bless you, my precious child.—DADDY.

"Say a prayer for me to-night, my dearest one, for I am weary, and have need of prayers."

Again, and once again, did Christine read this letter, which said so little and revealed so much.

She rose at last and went to the window.

Her very soul yearned over her father.

"To divide himself from me now! Now, when there is trouble!" she said to herself passionately. "Oh, Daddy, Daddy, why did you go—or if you were obliged to go, why did you not take me with you?"

She no longer played with truths. To the full she realized now that Henry Fielding was menaced by something terrible, a black, maybe a relentless, trouble. The recollection of the scene which she had interrupted came once more before her eyes to add to the suffering. The ugly reality of that strange man, his rough voice, his passionate denunciation, the awful words of insult hurled with such deliberation, took on anew a terrible degree of significance. Moreover, this letter stated frankly that the business which had called Henry Fielding away was connected with his strange and sinister visitor.

"He ought not to have gone. If he loved me only half as well as I love him, he *could* not have gone. He wants someone with him, and no one can be what I can be. I shall not stay here—I—shall go mad. To-morrow, very early, I shall go to London. Peggy will look after things here." So in her hour of suffering Christine talked with herself. Only once she remembered George Narborough, and then she hid her face in her hands. She felt that she almost hated him, because even for a few minutes he had made her forget her father: forget the reality of her life and its duties. Surely some instinct within her, that essential spirit of comprehensive sympathy on which her devotion to her father was built up, should have warned her that this was a moment of supreme importance in her beloved's life, and so an equally supreme moment for herself? Christine could not rest. Backwards and forwards she walked the length of her room. She longed for the night to pass; she was eager for the morrow. Sometimes the pressure of her apprehensive thought gave her a sense of suffocation, at others the wind blowing in through the widely-open window would seem so chilly that with a shiver she would close the window, only to open it again the next moment. She was ill with restlessness. Once she said to herself, "I will go to Peggy." But she did not go. Till she knew more, till the trouble had been shared with her father, she felt she must suffer and wait alone.

Suddenly, as she was pausing a moment by the window, a slight noise on the ground below attracted her attention. Quick to take alarm in

her present mood, Christine leaned forward and, peering down, she made out that a man was below, and that he was shaking one of the lower doors and calling for Casson to answer him. As Christine heard the man give an impatient exclamation, and then start his task of rousing someone, she spoke on impulse:

"Who are you—what do you want?" Then before he could answer she added, "I will come down."

She was cold and quivering with nervousness, as she slipped out of her room, along the passage and down the oaken staircase. The house was very silent. With the moon gone and the lamps extinguished, the darkness was almost black. But Christine knew her way. Every step in that old house she could have taken blindfolded. Moreover, the strange, cold fear which possessed her gave her insight in a way she never afterwards understood.

When she reached the part where the kitchen and the servants' quarters lay, she heard voices whispering together, and she guessed at once that the butler had at last been aroused, and had answered that eager summons.

It was Casson who saw the girl first. He turned to give some explanation, but Miss Fielding spoke quickly.

"Something has happened," she said in a low, tense voice; "something is wrong—don't try to hide anything from me. I——" she broke off suddenly and, leaning forward, bent her head listening intently; then she went forward again.

The butler followed, still eager to speak, but Christine only said, "Hush!" in a stern way, and drew away from him. The lower door was open and she faced the night. The beating of her own heart made a thud in Christine's ears at first, but, after awhile, as she stood there waiting (she knew not for what), there came the sound of measured tread: the sound of many feet moving in unison.

"They are coming to the front entrance," she said to herself, and turning to Casson, she said: "Open the door," in a tone of command. With a swift, half-frightened look the butler obeyed her. He followed her into the hall and then unlocked the door and drew back the bolts. When the door was open, in the same hard tone she bade him light the lamps, and when this was done, she went forward and stood in the doorway, waiting for those who came. There was one man in advance, who recoiled as he saw her. It was Dr. Brathmore, the kindly friend who had dined with them only a few hours before.

But Christine was very calm.

"You have come to bring me bad news," she said; "I can guess it, my—my father is ill?"

And the other, taking calmness from her, answered her quietly:

"It's only a fainting fit, it means that Mr. Fielding has been overdoing things as I warned him some time ago. Luckily I was at home, and they had the sense to come for me; I wanted to have your father stay with us the night, but he would not hear of this. He clamoured to be brought back

here, back to you. We've done this with all the speed we could, but as he was not fit to be driven, we have carried him between us. And now, Christine, I want to get him to bed without delay."

Christine was not listening. She was staring at the group which was approaching, and which had such a sinister look as it became detached from the mist of the night, and took its proper shape and significance. As they passed slowly into the house with their heavy burden, Christine almost ran to the couch.

"Lay him here," she said, and she carefully arranged the cushions.

The command was obeyed, the unconscious man was placed slowly, carefully on the cushions, and his bearers moved backward in silence; a silence broken only by their heavy breathing.

Christine knelt by her father as Dr. Brathmore bent over his patient. He touched Henry Fielding's lips with some stimulant, and frowned as he did so, his fingers encircled the pulse of the limp wrist. Then he dropped the hand, and, bending still lower, stared into the half-closed eyes and nervously placed his hand on the heart.

"Father!" breathed the girl on her knees. "Father!—my dearest."

There was no answer—not even a look. The master of the house, the master of millions, lay silent on the cushions. Someone, awakened by the noise, had come hurrying down from above, carrying a candle: it was Margaret Dudworth, and the light she held fell on the couch and showed the waxen set face.

"Father," whispered Christine a second time. "Father!"

The medical man caught his breath and brushed his eyes; then he spoke to her in a low voice: words which none could hear but herself.

The girl got up from her knees and looked into his face, not wildly, but searchingly.

Then she said very clearly: "Will you all leave me, please?"

The men who had carried that heavy burden, and who had lingered at the door, turned at this, and moved out, all except one, with bent heads and careful steps, and as they went Christine seemed to wake for a moment.

"I—I can't thank you now——" she said. "I will—I——"

The words broke strangled in her throat. Her gaze had been suddenly magnetized by the unexpected contact with another pair of eyes, dark eyes which burned into hers.

In the wildness of her suffering she cried out against this man, unconscious that the words she would have uttered were too incoherent to be understood:

"And you dared to help! You were one of those who carried him. You! You . . ."

The sentence was never finished. She moved to reach Mrs. Dudworth, but she stumbled and staggered, and, indeed, she would have fallen, but that the man to whom she had spoken so wildly, stretched out his arms and caught her. Just for an instant she was conscious of a great strength; just for that instant she lay looking into those

dark, commanding, wonderful eyes: then her sense faded, and she rested heavily in his arms like one dead.

Tears were blinding Margaret Dudworth.

"*Give her to me*—my child—my poor Christine," she said brokenly; but as she held out her arms she found herself quietly set on one side by George Narborough, who had rapidly joined the group in the hall during the last few minutes, and who now, with convincing authority, assumed the mastership of the moment.

Without a word, he took Christine from the man who held her and lifted her to one of the big chairs.

"Get rid of all these people," he said curtly to Casson.

The man who had lingered paused just an instant to glance from the dead man lying on the couch to the white-faced girl crouching in the chair; then he passed out of the large doorway, and instead of joining the other men, who still loitered outside feeling they might still be wanted, he walked swiftly through the grounds to the village and high road beyond.

CHAPTER IV

THE days which followed on that tragically sudden death were anxious ones for Mrs. Dudworth. As she had said to Sir George, there had been times in the past when she had tried to picture to herself what would happen if Henry Fielding were to have a serious illness, but his death had been a possibility she had rarely let herself dwell upon, for she had felt powerless to sketch, even in her imagination, the effect which such a sorrow would have upon his daughter.

And now this worst of griefs had fallen to the girl's lot, and she had fallen with it.

At least it seemed to the woman who tended her, who nursed her with all the anxious care and loving thought of a mother, that the young spirit had been beaten down so fiercely it would never rise again, never at least be the joyous, hopeful spirit of the past. Margaret Dudworth was grateful for the spell of illness which had fallen upon the girl. She took control of Christine entirely; her own boy, stunned and in a degree frightened by the sudden death, was packed off to some relations. Mrs. Dudworth had hoped that Sir George would

have gone when Roger went. But Sir George had no intention of going; he remained at Hunston as a matter of course.

To do him justice, the young man had been really very much upset for a little while, but the situation had claims upon him, and he responded promptly to these claims. In this moment he lost no time in demonstrating his right to move actively and intimately in Miss Fielding's affairs. If he could have had his way he would have made immediate arrangements to have separated her from her present surroundings. Having now declared himself, he was possessed with a desire to annex Christine to himself, to bring her into what he considered her proper sphere.

There was a note of aggression in Narborough's nature, a note which faintly suggested tyranny, and in Christine's life hitherto there had not existed even the meaning of such a word.

"George will need much tact in handling her, she is so unlike other girls," Mrs. Dudworth said to herself more than once. She knew that he had already sketched out in his mind plans for the immediate future.

Lady Ellen Narborough had written tenderly to her future daughter-in-law, and it was to his mother's charming home in Hampshire that Sir George resolved to carry Christine when she should be well enough to travel.

To his annoyance, however, Mrs. Dudworth did not agree in the least with this arrangement.

"Christine must have a thorough change of scene. I am going to take her away myself," she said. "I

am an old wanderer as you know, and I have tested the benefit of travel in a case like this. I quite agree with you that Christine has already been here long enough. As you know, I repeatedly urged this on her poor father. To her, life centres in this house. Though she has been occasionally away from it she has not the least idea of all that passes, and struggles, and lives outside; but we will change this. I shall rush her abroad perhaps, or perhaps I shall take her for a sea voyage. At present I have not made up my mind."

"It seems to me," said Sir George, with his cold smile, "that you have made up your mind! Of course, you know, Peggy," he added the next moment, "that you have to reckon with me now in all that concerns Christine's movements."

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," said Mrs. Dudworth in her brisk way, "but to be quite frank with you, George, I am not thinking about you just now; your time will come. I am thinking about my girl, and I believe—don't think me conceited—that I am about the one and only person who will understand how to handle her just now. Won't you trust her to me? Don't you know I love her? After all, you owe me some consideration you know, for I brought you together."

"My mother will be bitterly disappointed," the young man answered, with no attempt at concealing his annoyance; "she is most anxious to see Christine, and this is a most natural wish."

"Oh, leave me to make it all right with your mother," said Mrs. Dudworth briskly.

Sir George answered this with a question:

"As you are arranging so much, perhaps you will let me know when I am to see Christine?"

"Very soon now. After the funeral. You have been very patient. I am sure Christine is grateful to you. But I want you to be prepared; it is not that she looks so ill, it is that you will find her different. Sometimes I am half afraid that that Child whom I have known and loved so much has passed away with her father."

She hardly liked to confess to herself how much she dreaded the approaching interview between Christine and Narborough. If she could have postponed their meeting still longer she would have done so gladly.

"But one has to go gently with George," she mused to herself with a faint smile, and once again, not for the first time during these many days of close and sad thought, Margaret Dudworth had a feeling of uneasiness, a sensation of doubt, when she pictured the future for those two together.

There were moments when she felt only too surely that the girl regretted her engagement, although of course it was a matter on which they had not spoken; Christine spoke so little on any subject.

She was like one stunned. All day she sat by the open window of her bedroom. She watched the sun rise and she watched it sink to rest again. She watched the fleecy clouds pile themselves in fantastic and glorious shapes above the bronze green of the hill-sides. Every breeze, every scent, every gradation of colour in the summer picture on which she gazed was dear to her.

"This is where I will live and where I will

die," she said to herself. Everything that lay outside this loved place was so terrifying to her imagination. And yet into the heart of this promised solace there stole unbidden the bitterest presentiment that the peace she craved would be denied her. Almost her first words when consciousness had returned had been used to question her maid, Barker. The woman had been with her a long time; she was loyal and discreet. She could, however, tell her young mistress nothing whatever about the strange man whose movements were of such vital importance to Christine. He had gone, as he had come, mysteriously. To Christine's nerve-strained imagination it was as though he had been sent to fulfil some task, and, having done it, had gone to his own again. It was useless to be told now that for long her father's health had been precarious, that he had been suffering from an acute form of heart-disease. To her, his death had been brought about absolutely from the shock of meeting a powerful, a relentless enemy. Had that strange man never presented himself, her father would have lived perhaps for many years.

This was what the girl said to herself with anguished conviction, and the poison of this belief ran in her veins and made the outlook of her future not merely desolate, but terrifying.

Such a mood was on her when she and George Narborough met again.

The dead man had been carried to the grave and his will had been read. It bore a very recent date, and—except for a sum of money settled on Roger Dudworth and some jewels and two or three

pictures to Roger's mother—bequeathed everything of which Henry Fielding had been possessed to his daughter. Christine would be far, far richer than Sir George had imagined; a matter which was certainly not displeasing to him. It was not till many days later that he saw her. She came out of her room and they met in the hall, which was flooded with the afternoon sunshine. George Narborough's manner was tender and discreet, though her appearance gave him a shock. She looked so thin, so old; there was not even a suggestion of prettiness in her. He did not attempt to embrace her. Christine was sensibly touched by the way (laboured though it was) that he endeavoured to suit himself to her feelings. Despite all this, however, something urged Mrs. Dudworth to manœuvre to keep the engaged couple apart. She hurried on the preparations for departure and Christine went back to her room, to her dreams. It was only the certain knowledge that it had been her father's express desire that she should travel which prevailed on the girl to agree to any departure from Hunston Manor. Left to herself, she would have drifted on indefinitely. One happiness she permitted herself. Nothing was to be changed at Hunston.

Sir George Narborough left the house before they did, and Margaret Dudworth felt it her duty to sing the young man's praises.

"He has been so patient, so unusually gentle, Christine darling. I never imagined it was in George to be so kind and considerate."

"Yes, he has been very kind," Christine had said

almost humbly. But it was evident that her thoughts were not with Sir George. As they were driven through the sunlit country, she sat like one transfixed, but when they reached the little station, from which they would be carried to London, her almost unnatural composure went from her.

"Oh! my heart is broken, Peggy!" she cried aloud, and then she broke into weeping, and it was long before she could be comforted or soothed. And when London was reached and Roger met her, and she saw the boy's efforts to be calm and not to make a scene, or, as he put it, to his mother, "do anything rotten to churn up Chris," it was with only an effort of supreme determination that the girl did not break down a second time. After she had been a day or two in town, however, she grew outwardly tranquil again.

Roger went back to school, and Mrs. Dudworth left her very much to herself, and Christine was so grateful to her.

On the afternoon previous to the day on which they were to sail for what Margaret Dudworth called "a sharp run" in the United States, Christine went for the first time to the office where the greater part of her father's life had been spent. Miss Fielding's visit was unexpected, but she was received almost in state, and was at once ushered into the room which her father had been wont to occupy. Christine's eyes were tearless as she stood and looked about her. Her face was pale, but composed. There was only purpose, an intense, almost a painful look of decision written in her

expression. When her father's colleagues came to speak to her it was at once made manifest by their manner that they fancied as Mrs. Dudworth had fancied, that this visit was merely the outcome of a sentimental desire to see those places where her father had worked, but Christine quickly showed them they were wrong.

She listened to their words of condolence, and to their words of remembrance and affection for her dead father with quiet graciousness, though these men would have been amazed could they have realized how sweet was this tribute to the memory of the dead, how merciful, how helpful! And then Christine put to them the question which had been burning in her brain since that dread, that unforgettable, night.

"I want to know," she said in a low voice, "I want to be told—quite frankly—if there was anything pressing on my father's mind, any trouble in connection with this business, which might account for the illness and the heart-strain which brought about his death?"

The question seemed almost ridiculous. One and all assured Christine that never had the firm been in such a high state of prosperity, never had Mr. Fielding's own position been so great. His financial standing was in every way unassailable; this was repeated in the most emphatic way. Most certainly in business there had been no suggestion of trouble, no contrary element, nothing but an ever-increasing pressure of responsibility, and with it a greater burden of wealth, if wealth could be called a burden.

And so his daughter had to be satisfied, but the presence of a terrible, an agonizing, doubt that was half fear lived with her always—always.

When she went back to the hotel where Mrs. Dudworth and she were staying, she found that Sir George Narborough had been, and that his mother had also called.

"I had no idea Ellen was in town, she comes so rarely, but she told me that she is longing to see you. She is a sweet woman, Christine, one you will learn to love very easily. I promised you would go early and see her to-morrow," Mrs. Dudworth said lightly.

"I will surely go, and I am sorry I was not here when she came," the girl said a little wearily, "but I went to the City to—to Daddy's offices. I was anxious to go there before we sailed."

Mrs. Dudworth looked at her quickly.

It was not the first time that a suggestion had passed through her mind that there was something which Christine was keeping to herself, something which lay hidden beneath her sorrow. It would have surprised her, indeed, could she have even imagined the burden of Christine Fielding's thoughts as she lay back now in the chair, apparently too weary to talk.

"If the heads of the firm knew nothing," the girl mused to herself, "that would not necessarily mean that there was nothing to know. It would only mean that this trouble was a new and utterly unexpected one, something, perhaps, apart from business altogether."

There was only one person who could throw

light on this mystery, give the explanation she yearned to have, who could lift this intolerable burden of fear and suspense from her heart. She could do nothing but wait (and waiting was so cruel); but she must always be prepared. The words of that last letter Henry Fielding had written had taken on a weighty significance now.

"Oh, if I could only feel that I had been given the power to put peace into his dear heart, to let him go, knowing that what he was not permitted to do, I would do, even if it cost me my life!"

"A cup of tea, dearest?" said Mrs. Dudworth, coming forward, and Christine roused herself from her thoughts—roused herself, and tried to put them aside.

"Dear, dear Peggy. How good you are to me!" she said once, and she caught Mrs. Dudworth's hands, and carried them to her lips. "Was there ever anyone so good, so helpful as you? Just be patient with me a little longer, dear, and you shall be repaid for all your goodness."

"When I can see the colour come back into those cheeks," said Margaret Dudworth gently, "and the old smile to your lips, then I shall be repaid. And these things shall come," she added gaily. "I am an autocrat in some things, and I am determined to make you well, and bring you back strong in heart and body. But whatever lies before you in the future, remember," said Mrs. Dudworth, half lightly, half seriously, as she sat on a low chair close to the girl, "remember you are quite an important person now, Christine, and much is expected of you. You will not only

be your father's daughter, you must be your father yourself. If he had not felt that you were fit for such a great position, I am convinced that he would not have left you all as he has done. But he knew your capabilities. He knew your pride—your strength—your honour, and that you would never fail where duty had to be done."

The words seemed to put courage into Christine.

"Oh! you only say what I think—what I believe, what I hope is true!" she said, and bending, she kissed her cousin. "Peggy, my one prayer is, that I may do what is right! And somehow I feel—I hardly know how to explain it, but I feel that I may be even before long put to some great test, and Peggy, darling, if that time should come I must not fail. Oh! I must not fail!"

Margaret Dudworth laughed. "'No fear,' to quote Roger. You won't fail, you are not made of the stuff that ever fails. Now," rising, "I want you to go and rest. You look tired out. Don't bother about me. I have at least a hundred letters to get through before we sail. I'll start on them now."

CHAPTER V

SIR GEORGE dined with his mother that night in her London home, which she visited so rarely. He was not in a pleasant mood. On his second visit to the hotel he had found Mrs. Dudworth again alone. She told him that Christine had gone to her room, and was absolutely unfit to do as he wished and dine with his mother.

"She came back from the City exhausted. Really she is not fit to go out again. You must scold me, I am to blame. I have sent her to bed, George."

"She ought really to come," the young man said almost sullenly. "I don't know how to explain things to my mother; she will think it so strange not to meet Christine."

"Your mother understands. She was most sweet about the child. I explained everything. We are going to her in the morning."

Sir George bit his lip sharply. Some bitter words hovered on his lips, but he suppressed them. Only that he was afraid everything would be ended, he would have frankly expressed his anger at Mrs. Dudworth's usurpation of Christine. But he was conscious that his personal hold on the

girl, always dangerously slight, had practically gone. Mortifying as it was to confess so much to himself, he knew that the only bit of sure ground on which he could stand existed in the fact that the marriage with himself had been desired, even ardently desired, by Henry Fielding. So much he had heard from Mrs. Dudworth, and he determined to make the very most of this argument. For now the mere thought of losing Christine alarmed and infuriated the man. His vanity was in arms, and already he was tasting the sweets of that power which great wealth can give. Moreover, he was obstinate, and the suggestion that Christine wanted her freedom, and would deny him his right to command her, steeled his purpose to hold her more closely than ever to her bond.

The dinner at his mother's house was not very lively. Lady Ellen Narborough, who idolized her son, divined that something was fretting Sir George. With delicate tact she ceased to speak of Christine and her approaching departure; forebore, too, to know what her son's plans would be during the absence of his betrothed, though this meant so much to herself. She chatted instead to the girl, or rather young woman, who made the third at the dinner-table. Constance Knox was dark and very handsome in a cold statuesque style. She was a distant connection, and lived with Lady Ellen as a companion and secretary. When his mother rose to go to her room Sir George gave her his arm, and Miss Knox should have followed also, but she lingered, waiting for the possible chance of

a few words with him. When she was alone the cold mask-like expression of her face changed. Her eyes grew passionate, and her lips quivered. She stood a moment, looking at herself in the mirror over the mantelshelf, and then she took up the portrait of Christine Fielding, which was already in the place of honour, and looked at it with burning, passionate eyes. Not even her hot jealousy could deny Christine's charm and personal attraction, and an overwhelming bitterness filled her heart as she realized all that this other girl possessed—this girl who was to be George Narborough's wife. She put the portrait from her, as at that moment she heard Sir George's step on the stairs. The colour flashed into her face; for one moment she looked quite beautiful, but as the steps passed the door, and a second or two later she heard the sound of someone leaving the house, Constance Knox sat down and covered her face with her hands. Lady Ellen would be waiting for her. Her duty called to her, but for once she was deaf to the call.

It was so hard to realize the truth that she was really set on one side—a person of no account. She had never blinded herself, had never built any real hope on his cautious admiration, she had only loved and lived in that love, and now the years stretched before her in grey desolation, and her heart seemed to break as she pictured the future. She was just one of the many women whom Sir George had found interesting at odd times in his career. For himself he had regarded his admiration of Constance as a legitimate adjunct to that distant

relationship which had brought them together. He had found it agreeable to be welcomed by this young woman when he had gone now and again to stay with his mother, but he had, of course, been very, very careful. With others there had at times been folly, and even danger, but the man had not been so foolish as to risk any uncomfortable results from a friendship with his mother's companion. And yet Constance had given him her heart: a gift she had never been able to disguise or dissimulate; a gift which the man neither valued nor desired—especially at such a time as this he was very far from troubling himself about Constance Knox.

On leaving the house, Sir George turned once again in the direction of the hotel where Christine was staying. He did not [illegible] Constance Knox from any fear of a regrettable outburst (although in these matters he knew women, even the proudest of them, were unreliable), but just for the moment every other woman annoyed him. He wanted only Christine Fielding: he had never been treated by any living creature in the way this girl was treating him, and if only from a resentful determination to reverse their position, his mind was obsessed with the thought of her. Therefore now, before going to one of his various clubs, Sir George walked to the hotel where Miss Fielding was staying. He merely left a few scribbled words to be sent up to her, and did not ask to see Mrs. Dudworth. He had already sent in a lavish gift of flowers; nothing was lacking to let the girl know she was in his thoughts.

As he passed out of the hotel he stood in the entrance waiting whilst the porter whistled for a motor-cab, and as he waited a man passed slowly in front of him looking at the brilliantly lit entrance half carelessly.

"I've seen that fellow before—I wonder where?" Narborough mused to himself half idly. Then the cab pulled up and he got in and drove away, and as he bowled along a remembrance came to him suddenly, and he frowned sharply.

The visions of the streets faded, and he was once again in the hall of Hunston Manor. It was the night, the moment of Henry Fielding's death, and out of the confusion which prevailed, the sense of catastrophe, the frightened whispering of the servants, he saw again, as he had seen then with angry eyes, Christine lying white and motionless in the arms of a rough sort of man, a man with a finely cut face whose dark eyes had met his own in challenging fashion. There had been something about this man which had riveted his attention, something which Narborough now remembered had stung his arrogant spirit into action.

It was, of course, very ridiculous, but the fact that this same man should have been sauntering in such close proximity to the place where Christine now was, provoked Sir George to anger. Later on, however, he summed up the position shrewdly.

"He has read in the papers that Miss Fielding is in town, and means, of course, to sponge on her. If he only whispers the fact that he was one of

those who carried her father from the station to Hunston, Christine will give him a small fortune! Happily in one sense she goes to-morrow, and I shall take precious good care this fellow does not get near her before she leaves!"

CHAPTER VI

ABOUT noon the weather cleared, the rain ceased, and every now and then the sun tried to make an entrance through the grey driving clouds. Few of the passengers on the great Atlantic liner bound from New York for Southampton had had the courage to venture on deck, for there was a heavy sea and the air was very cold, but Christine Fielding had sat out in a sheltered corner nearly all the morning. She had a book on her lap, but she had not turned a single page. It was far more interesting to sit and watch the steamer plough its way through the grey-green sea; to note almost with a thrill of apprehension how sometimes the mass of waters would gather higher and higher till it was as though a great wall had been carved out of the restless sea, to stand as a barrier in their pathway; to hear as in a dream the voices of the sailors calling to one another, and to follow in the same dreamy fashion the circling flight of the gulls.

When they swung upwards to the crest of a mountain-high wave, and the great boat trembled a little at the impact of the water, Christine would

hold her breath, and then she would watch eagerly for the flashing spray which always followed on the boom with which they settled in the hollow again, and left the mountain wave behind. Now and again white sheets of this spray would fall on the deck and splash her refreshingly. The girl did not mind the cold or the rain, and she had no uncomfortable sensations even when the steamer lurched, as it did sometimes, and every loose object in the cabin did a kind of war-dance on the floor. Sometimes she would laugh even in the old happy fashion.

Mrs. Dudworth's prescription had done wonders for the girl, and Margaret Dudworth's own healthful, tactful influence had worked even more beneficially on Christine than the constant change, and the physical demand which frequent travelling during the last few months had signified. There had been times, indeed, in which the girl had been so fatigued bodily that any except the most ordinary thought was out of the question, and when her brain had been bewildered with the crowded impressions which perpetual movement brought to her. And in these times the woman who was with her had been full of resource and sympathy, always exercising a tender and a helpful influence.

They were now five days out from New York, and with the return to England Margaret Dudworth found herself watching the girl anxiously. Though she did not show it outwardly, she yet dreaded this return to all the old associations. Certainly during this homeward voyage Christine had begun in a certain degree to lose the calm look

the cheerful demeanour, which had characterized her of late. Whether this arose simply from the awakening of old sad memories, or whether the unexpected appearance of George Narborough on the scene was the cause, Mrs. Dudworth could not determine. For Sir George had crossed the Atlantic on purpose to meet them in New York and make the return journey with them.

It was a gallant attention, and should have awakened in the girl some enthusiasm, some expression of tender appreciation. But Christine gave no such expression; she had turned very white, and had even winced when she had seen the man, and Margaret Dudworth was vaguely afraid Sir George had done his own cause no good by this sudden appearance.

Christine certainly avoided being alone with him. She rose now and walked to the end of the long promenade deck.

It was no easy task to stand firmly and steadily, but she gripped the white railing as tightly as possible, and looked out ahead eagerly, only turning aside every now and then to gasp as the strong, keen wind caught her breath.

The restlessness, the absolutely magnificent force of the sea, kept a thrill alive in her heart, and moved her so much that her eyes were wet, not solely with the spray which danced over her at every second.

She had never been able to analyze the thoughts which held her in thrall in such moments as these. She only knew that she was lifted far, far away from the commonplace, that everything which had

seemed so great to her at other times, would fade and become infinitesimally small. Even her sorrow, that dark weight of desolation and personal longing, appeared to her in such moments almost puny and of no account. The individual side of life ceased to have any existence in such an atmosphere as this, where all was so vast, so grand, so appalling. In such a moment there was a solace in being alone, and so she turned with a jar at her heart as George Narborough stood beside her.

Christine had not heard him approach. She was watching the steamer dip till the water-line seemed in the sky above them; she loved to see the white banks of velvet foam sweep past the side of the ship, and she would follow the trail of this foam as it spread itself over the mass of dark waters and was carried away, a mere streak of fleck of white, till she could see it no longer.

It angered the man sharply as he stood close to her, to see how slowly she awaked to the knowledge that he was there, and how, as he suggested they should walk, a kind of veil seemed to drop over her eyes, and a listlessness succeeded that eager, almost strenuous, expression which had pervaded her as she had stood alone. The majority of men are extraordinarily one-idea'd in their definition of woman. They cling, for instance, to the tradition that all women are alike, and that certain rules can be applied confidently and with success in certain circumstances. There surely was never a greater error than to suppose that such a complex creation as woman could be judged as a race and not as a separate individual.

Broadly speaking, a woman starts from her infancy as the superior of man in certain ways: in those subtle undercurrents which can be used so ill or so well; the sense of this mental superiority lies hidden like the sting of a bee, but it is never quite dormant. To such a man as George Narborough, of course, the mere suggestion that he did not thoroughly comprehend either the nature or the character of Christine would have been preposterous. What he imagined was that she was still not in a normal mental condition, and over and above this he regarded her as having been ridiculously spoilt by her father. He had (falling back on the time-hallowed traditions), treated her with what he regarded as the greatest consideration, that is to say, he had permitted her a certain time in which to indulge in her grief much in the same spirit that he would have given a holiday to a child, and now he was resolved on adopting another sensible course. Christine must be openly mastered, openly shown the proper path to tread; her independence must be tempered gradually till it became a thing of naught.

"You will get wet through if you stand here much longer. Come for a walk," he said now. "I hope you have on stout shoes. Let me see?"

With half a frown and half a smile Christine obeyed him. He approved of the neat, strong boots.

"I've been up in the Marconi house watching the operator. By Jove! it's a weird thing, this wireless business. Would you like to go and see the man at work? We might send a message to someone if you like."

"I should like to go," Christine said quickly; "and we might send a message to Roger—it would please him. I feel awfully mean sometimes when I realize that I have separated Peggy from her baby all this time."

"Well, we shall soon alter that. Mind where you go, this deck is as slippery as ice."

They moved on for a time in silence; then Christine, conscious that something was expected of her, roused herself.

"You promised to take me over the ship. Can we go after we have sent our message? I should love to see it," she said.

Sir George brightened up instantly.

"Would you? All right, we'll make a start. I am only too happy to be allowed to do something for you."

Christine coloured softly at his affectionate tone, and with a little shy gesture slipped her hand through his arm.

He caught that hand and carried it to his lips.

"Be kind to me," he said in a whisper. "You have been away from me so long. I have lived only to see you again, but it almost seems at times as if these many months of absence had put me out of your thoughts."

The girl's eyes filled with tears.

"I am afraid I have been selfish," she said in a low voice, almost humbly, and the man murmured his forgiveness, not altogether without condescension, for, in truth, he considered he had been badly treated. Furthermore, he was well satisfied with

this evidence of malleability. If Christine should now take up the position in the proper conventional spirit matters would quickly progress to a better understanding between them. The girl seemed desirous of making an effort, at least, to play her part properly, and, as a matter of fact, she was genuinely interested in all she now saw.

It was almost pleasant exploring the ship together. Sir George held Christine very tightly by the arm, and once, when there was a heavy sea, and she almost fell against him, he bent, and touched her fresh, cold cheek with his lips.

As the colour rushed once again into her sensitive face, and her eyes drooped, he felt quite master of the situation again.

"And as soon as we are married there shall be no more nonsense," he determined. "I shall fix up the wedding immediately after we land, we have wasted enough time already; and no matter what Peggy says, I shall put my foot down and insist that Christine gives Hunston Manor a wide berth. I hate all the people she has about her up there. She doesn't want old associations and her father's grave, she wants rousing. She must be in town for the early season."

They went everywhere, piloted by one of the officers. Though she was not allowed to go near, Christine was permitted a glimpse into the engine-room, and her heart was moved with mingled emotion and fear as she bent down and looked at the roaring furnaces, watching the stokers move hither and thither in the fierce glow. The significance of man's defiant ambition was brought

home to her in such a moment. To these half-clad men the tossing of the waves, the mighty force of the ocean itself, and the danger of their calling, seemed ordinary things.

The lower deck made Christine sad.

All was wonderfully in order; nevertheless, she felt almost ashamed to contrast her own luxurious travelling with the crowded condition, the unlovely surroundings in which so many of her fellow-creatures travelled.

The power of money had already commenced to wound Christine. It humiliated her now to feel that it was only money which set her so much higher than all these people, who looked at her with curiosity and sullen admiration. She paused awhile to speak to an old couple who were journeying back to the land of their birth, and the hunger of these simple folk for the north country, for the heather and the broom, the mountains and the moors, awakened in Christine that old aching desire to be done with travelling and back in the tranquil beauty of Hunston.

She stood talking as long to these humble folk as her companion's impatience would allow. Sir George, in fact, was vexed at this renewal even in so faint a way with those influences he was so anxious to work out of her reach.

"It is time for luncheon," he reminded her, "and I am sure you ought to be hungry. I expect," he added, "that we shall have the grill-room practically to ourselves to-day. The weather is too rough to be pleasant to most people on board."

Christine had moved away obediently and fol-

lowed Sir George along the narrow deck, but she did not see him clearly. There were tears in her eyes.

"To think," she said to herself, "that he has lain in his grave all this time and I have never been beside it. I have never put a flower on it—oh! I yearn to be back with him, with all that he loved so much!"

When they reached the companion-way from which they would ascend to the upper deck, Sir George paused to say something to the officer who had shown them round, and Christine was alone for a moment.

"Go on, I will follow you," Narborough said. But Christine advanced only a few steps, and then suddenly stood still, for at that moment a man, who had been standing leaning against the taffrail, turned and looked at her. He looked with such deliberate intent, such a searching gaze, such a challenging expression as it were, that Christine Fielding, responding almost instantly to the magnetism of this gaze, lifted her eyes to his.

She recoiled just a little, and her breath came in gasping fashion as she recognized him. With an agonizing clearness her mind visioned the picture of that first time she had seen him. So he had stood with that undisguised contempt in his expression, that curious kind of insolence upon him as she had entered the study and found her father and him together. So he had looked when, after helping to carry her dead father into the house, she had so wildly denounced him.

She waited, fully expecting him to speak, to make

some sign. He did neither one nor the other, however; indeed, as Narborough hurried forward and joined Christine, the man turned round and took up his old position by the taffrail.

"So sorry to keep you standing, my dearest," Sir George said, and his words must have been distinctly clear to the ears of that other, standing so quietly looking out over the wide expanse of waters with such a suggestion of restrained malice in his quietness. Miss Fielding moved away mechanically beside Sir George, and he, glancing at her, frowned sharply. In that glance he saw at once that her mood of sympathy with himself had vanished again. Indeed, when the upper deck was reached, she made an excuse and left him to hurry to her cabin. She was thrilling in every nerve; her limbs trembled, and her heart was burning. As she entered her state-room, Barker gave her a note.

"This was brought by the stewardess, miss, a little while ago; she says she's sure it's only another begging letter from the steerage, the same sort as you've had already three or four times before; still, I suppose they think they won't lose nothing by asking. It's wonderful how quick they are to get to know who is on board."

Christine thanked the maid and her hand closed over the letter hurriedly. She knew by some intuition that this time it was no beggar who had written, and the moment Barker had left her she tore open the flimsy envelope, and turning on the electric light, read eagerly the message he had written. It was curt enough:

"We shall land on Thursday morning. Be so good as to acquaint me when it will be convenient for you to receive me. I have given you a fairly long time, but I cannot afford to wait any longer. The matter that has to be discussed between us is one which your father undertook solemnly to settle the night of his death. As he is gone, I look to you for justice. A telegram sent to the address written at the end of this letter will reach me, and I shall expect to hear from you within at least twelve hours after we reach Southampton.—Yours faithfully,

"JAMES DANCROFT."

Christine sat at the edge of her berth moving faintly as the boat swayed. She had crushed the letter in her hand; there was a suggestion of authority in it which almost enraged her; but what stung her even more was the fact that it was he who had broken the silence, he who had written recalling her to the fulfilment of her duty! And yet though her heart for a few minutes flamed with this fierce anger, she had not the least intention of refusing to obey his command.

It was curious how, even against inclination and courage, Christine felt that she was no longer a free agent; that she must suffer this man's rude intrusion; that defiance to his wishes was absolutely out of the question. True, more than once in the past few months, she had asked herself the question if it would not be wiser to carry this matter to her lawyers! Handled by clear-headed business men, no doubt the situation would possibly have

taken on a totally different aspect; moreover, sufficient time had elapsed since her father's death for any difficulty, any doubtful matter connected with himself, to have become known. Yet everything was in order. Though she had travelled so far, she had never been out of actual touch with those who now represented her in her father's business. She had been acquainted with all that had transpired in connection with the proving of her father's will, and the secretaries of the dead man had obeyed her wishes and forwarded on all such documents and correspondence as they had considered desirable to bring to her notice. Naturally there had been a superabundance of charity claims (Christine had set apart a big sum to be used for this purpose in memory of her father); yet among all these letters there had never been one which could be even construed into a threatening epistle. No one apparently had been waiting to cast a stone at the dead man; no one had come forward professing to hold secrets which would yield a fine harvest to those who sold them. Henry Fielding had gone to his grave mourned by a great many, followed by discreet obituary notices, and in a very little while he had been forgotten by the world at large. But despite all this, and though her pride rebelled against even the suggestion that this man, James Dancroft, had the right he assumed to have, the right to enter into her life, Christine recognized that there was but one course to pursue.

"I will see him," she said to herself, "I must see him; I—I am sure that is what my dearest would have wished me to do." And then in a

feverish sort of way she began to make plans, and as she was lost in this turmoil of troubled thoughts Mrs. Dudworth knocked at her door.

"Are you not coming to have luncheon, darling? George has sent me to find you."

Christine shook her head.

"I am not a bit hungry, and I have an awful headache. The wind is so strong." Then with a little catch in her voice she said: "Peggy, I am longing to get off this boat. I am longing for Hunston."

Margaret Dudworth wrinkled her brows a little.

"Well, I shall be just as glad to land, especially as my baby will be waiting to welcome me. You must be prepared for a bear's hug, Christine; and, talking of our plans, don't forget you have promised to stay a while with me in town. Roger will have to go back to school. He has only had special leave given to him to come and meet us." Mrs. Dudworth paused a little here. "George was saying just now that he wanted you to go straight down to his mother, but I managed to let him understand I thought this would not be quite possible, since you were promised to me."

"I am not going to stay anywhere. I am going to Hunston," Christine said almost hardly. "I've been away such a long time, Peggy; and, after all, it is my home." Then the girl looked at Mrs. Dudworth; her lips were quivering. "Peggy," she said, "*do* help me! Just let me have two or three days all to myself! It isn't much to ask. I—I feel I must be alone. Daddy always gave me so much liberty, I can't tell you how it tries

me to feel that I am being watched and followed, and that my every action must be accounted for."

"I think you are a little hard on George," Margaret Dudworth said almost coldly.

She realized the girl was strung up to the highest nervous pitch, and not having the slightest knowledge of any recent reason for this, she resented it; in fact, for a few moments she felt almost in sympathy with Narborough. But then again very quickly her feeling veered round to Christine.

"You see, darling," she said, "I do understand your wish, and I think it perfectly natural; but men are not so sentimental as women, and George cares for you so much that he can't bear to think that you should be wretched."

"I promise not to ask for more than two or three days," said Christine; "after that——"

She did not finish her sentence, for suddenly there fell upon her a sense of horrible fear.

What would follow after this two days of Hunston Manor, after that meeting with Dancroft? What lay in the future?

CHAPTER VII

It was a lovely afternoon in early spring, and the country was bathed in sunshine when Miss Fielding alighted from the train at the little familiar wayside station, and was greeted almost affectionately by the station-master and others.

Christine and her maid had travelled straight through from London, the heaviest part of the luggage would follow; she had expressly ordered that her own little pony-cart should be sent to meet her, and she drove herself away from the station with a heart which was at once touched with happiness (brought by the sight of familiar faces and well-loved landmarks), and yet was heavy with grief. She had never realized how much she loved her old home till now she was approaching it again. It was the time of the year she loved the best. On every hand trees were bursting into leaf, the air was fragrant with lilac.

"England is the most beautiful country in the world," she said to the groom who sat beside her, "and oh! I am so glad to be home again."

Nevertheless, as she drove up to the old-fashioned entrance, Christine's eyes were wet and her lips

quivering. The old house looked so picturesque, so tranquil, so homelike, yet she knew the moment she crossed the threshold that she would grieve for her father far more keenly than she had ever done during those many months while she had been away from Hunston.

The servants were all assembled to greet her, and as she gave her hand to each of them Christine tried to show that she was brave, though the tears were rolling down her cheeks under her thick veil.

"I will have tea here in the hall," she said.

As the servants dispersed and she was alone, Christine stood and looked at her father's portrait, that masterpiece which on exhibition had called forth such eulogies of praise from critics and the public.

The girl searched the painted face with an eagerness of which she was barely conscious. She remembered as she stood there having heard that the peculiar gift of the modern master who had made this wonderful portrait was, that he did not merely give feature for feature, but that he portrayed the soul, that his brush unconsciously gave forth the secrets of the heart. Certainly in this hour it seemed to Christine Fielding that she was reading truths in her father's face which had been hidden to her all the years she had known him.

He had always been called a cold man, a hard man; by some a man of mystery. To-day his daughter realized that what he had really been was a man of suffering, a man who had *feared*, a man who had possessed two distinct personalities.

She was seated with her veil thrown back gazing steadily at the picture when Casson the butler brought in the tea-table and handed her a telegram.

"All your letters, miss, were sent to Mrs. Dudworth's house in London; we didn't know you'd be here so soon."

"That was quite right," said Christine.

Her hand had closed over the telegram, and she had turned very cold.

On landing that morning she had with the utmost difficulty managed to despatch a telegram to the address Dancroft had given her, and she knew the message Casson gave her came from him. It was worded curtly:

"Please expect me this evening."

Though she had asked for tea, Christine could not touch it. She threw herself into a chair, and sat with closed eyes lost in a very turmoil of thought. Not for a single instant did she attribute to this man any other motive for approaching her beyond that of demanding justice. She had by now convinced herself that he had a right to demand this interview. Sitting there, memory travelled back to that dark night when her father had died; and as clearly as though she were living once again the actual experience, Christine could see the scene upon which she had looked that night.

The green-shaded reading-lamp on the table, the quiet, handsome furniture and appointments, and

the two men facing one another—her father on one side of the table, that rough-looking man, with his dark hair flecked with white, and his stern, even cruel, face on the other. With a shiver, she remembered the expression on her father's face, and she could hear once again his voice speaking as she had opened the door. The words he had uttered had failed to carry significance at that time. Now they were pregnant with a terrible meaning!

"I have said there shall be restitution—full and complete!"

With a jerk the girl sat forward in her chair; her heart was beating in her throat, for the instant she felt as though she were suffocating.

Memory travelling backwards brought other things. She recollected how, as she had stood waiting at the door, she had heard her father's voice, so changed, so hoarse, so pitiful, begging for time. "Give me time," he had said; "all shall be done as you wish if you give me time!"

"Restitution!" The word had an ominous, a horrible sound. What was there that had to be given back? Why should her father have pleaded for time? He—a man of power, a man of wealth, a man whose every word was law to hundreds of other men. Why should he have sued with such humbleness, such pitiful abasement?

On to her agitated thoughts there broke suddenly the sound of wheels outside. Instantly the dreams, the vague terrors, fell away from Christine, her fear was so great that for a moment she quivered as with pain, then as Casson advanced into the hall she said:

"I am expecting a gentleman."

But the butler answered her hurriedly:

"It is the doctor's brougham, miss, with Mrs. Brathmore and her daughter."

He looked a little anxiously at Miss Fielding as he spoke. In the servants' quarters the word had gone round that Miss Christine looked very little better for all her travelling.

"Shall I say you are resting, miss?" he asked. "I expect it has got about that you are at home."

But Christine answered almost eagerly that she would like to see her friends, and indeed as she found herself folded in the motherly arms of Mrs. Brathmore and kissed so tenderly, she felt a very real touch of comfort and pleasure.

"We couldn't wait when we heard you were actually here—we just had to come!" said the doctor's wife. "Enid was looking forward to seeing you in town, but it is much nicer seeing you here."

"Enid!" exclaimed Christine, and she embraced her former girl-friend eagerly. "How sweet of you to come, and how lovely you look, so different! Are you really the little Enid who used to run races with me on the lawn?"

The other young woman laughed with a suggestion of complacency.

"I am just the same, only nearly a year older; and then, of course, being married and living in London makes such a difference."

"My dear," said Mrs. Brathmore, sitting down beside Christine, "I've such a lot to tell you, and so many questions to ask, and the doctor's pining

to see you, I know. Won't you come back with us and have a quiet evening? Enid's husband is here, but only for a few hours; he would be so glad to see you again."

"Do come," urged Enid Coniston.

But Christine shook her head.

"Don't ask me to-night, dear Mrs. Brathmore. I—I felt I had to come back here," she said, "because I had such a longing to spend a few quiet hours in this dear old house. I wonder how I ever had the strength of mind to leave it. Please forgive me, but I should prefer to stay here to-night."

Her old friend ceased to urge her, but with tactful sympathy fell into her mood and they sat and talked for half an hour. Mrs. Coniston let her mother do most of the talking. She was studying Christine. As children and young girls they had been the closest friends, but that intimacy seemed almost ridiculous to-day.

"She has lost all her good looks," mused Mrs. Coniston, "and how badly she is dressed! Why, her gown is positively shabby. Life is certainly very unfair! If we only had a quarter of Christine's money!"

It was so impossible not to be envious.

One had only to look at Mrs. Coniston to know that the largest influence in her nature was personal luxury. She was dressed exquisitely now, and it was almost absurd to suppose that she in reality was little more than a pauper, whilst this other pale, shabbily dressed girl in black possessed money which ran into millions.

"Of course I must cultivate her and put up with all her ways; I can't afford to lose her friendship, but I haven't really any sympathy with Christine," Mrs. Coniston mused on. "Everyone knows she cared for her father and all that, still it's awfully silly to go on weeping when he has been dead such a long time."

On her side Christine felt both the comfort, the warmth of the mother's sympathy and affection and the chilling influence of the little worldling who was to her such a travesty of the girl-friend whom she had loved devotedly. But as they rose to go Christine spoke tenderly to the younger woman.

"Just fancy, I have not seen you since your wedding-day; it seems a lifetime! But I have thought of you so often, Enid, and I have been so delighted to hear of your happiness."

"Oh yes, we jog along all right," said Enid Coniston. "We shouldn't have anything to grumble about if we only had just a little more money, but as it is, of course, we have a fearful struggle. My husband's practice is not big, though it is smart; and such a lot is expected of us. He really ought to have a motor, but unfortunately it won't run to that just yet."

Christine stood on the steps and waved her hand to them.

"Is that what life does?" she asked herself half passionately. "I have been longing to see Enid in my heart all this time, and now I almost wish I might never see her again."

The housekeeper was waiting to urge her to go to her room and rest a little while.

"You don't know how tired you look, miss," she said, and Christine confessed that she was tired.

"I will just change my gown," she said. "No, don't ask for lights, I know every inch of my way."

There came to her suddenly as she paused on the staircase a great yearning to be permitted to live out the rest of her life in this quiet old house. It seemed to her that the future could hold nothing sweeter or better for her than an existence spent in memories and made beautiful with deeds of love and charity.

"Will this be impossible?" she asked herself. But the real question was framed differently. "Shall I lose this in the restitution which my father would have made, which I must now make; must all this be taken from me?"

It may be truthfully said that this was the first time that Christine had actually realized what her confrontation with this mystery might signify to herself.

The real meaning of poverty was obscured for her naturally, since she had been surrounded by wealth all the days of her young life; and acutely sympathetic as she was it was impossible for Christine to grasp what life could be when it is denuded of the comfort and power of money. To lose her fortune, therefore, even in imagination, said very little to her, for she had not yet commenced to feel the burden and the joy that such wealth as hers imposes; but at the merest suggestion that she might be called upon to render up possession

of her loved old home the girl recoiled as from some new and unbearable suffering.

In her room, whilst her maid helped her to dress for her solitary dinner, Miss Fielding was trembling with sudden anguish. The woman who waited on her was greatly disturbed about her.

"Won't you let me bring your dinner upstairs, miss," she asked. "I expect you are feeling the effects of the voyage; people often feel badly for a day or two when they come on land, and you're shivering so much, miss. It is to be hoped you haven't caught cold."

"I would rather go down for dinner," Christine said. "I am not really ill, Barker; I'm only a little tired, and coming home hurts me. It is so sweet to be here, and yet it is so sad."

It was more than sad, it was desolate, to sit alone in the well-remembered dining-room and face her father's empty chair, yet could her heart have only been at rest there would have been melancholy happiness to Christine in these quiet hours spent alone with her beloved memories.

She had to make a pretence of eating, for Casson had told her that the cook had sent up all her favourite dishes.

"We are all glad to be doing something, miss," the butler said; "it has been a long time with you away."

"Everything changed, Casson," Christine said in a low voice, "when my father died."

She was not crying; the relief of tears was denied her, and with that aching dread of what was coming, gripping her heart, her woman's

weakness seemed frozen. It was not courage which environed her and kept her eyes dry. It was endurance; that proud iron endurance which she dimly felt was perhaps the most valuable legacy her father had bequeathed her. She was still seated at the dinner table when Casson brought her word that the gentleman whom she expected had arrived.

"He is in the hall, miss."

Christine paused for an instant, and then she said:

"Please take him into the library; say I will be with him directly."

CHAPTER VIII

JAMES DANCROFT followed the butler down the oak-lined passage to the room which Mr. Fielding had always used as his study.

It was the same room in which he had been received on his former visit. He remembered it distinctly.

The spring twilight had faded into dusk, the room felt chilly. Casson turned on the electric light. When he went back to Christine he said:

"It strikes quite cold in there, Miss Christine; shall I set a light to the fire?"

Christine said "No" at first, and then weakening suddenly with a woman's most natural touch of fear she said "Yes," adding, "I may have to sit there some time."

So the moment of meeting was relieved in a sense by the presence of Casson.

They waited whilst the fire flamed up, making a cheery crackling which broke the oppressive stillness; then as the butler went out of the room Christine said in a faint voice:

"Won't you sit down?"

He did not thank her, but pulling out a chair, sat down and put his felt hat on the table.

The room was just as it had been that memorable summer evening, except that the window leading to the garden was closed and the curtains carefully drawn. There were books of reference on the table, quantities of writing paper, all the little things which Christine herself had from time to time put on her father's table—prominent among these was a photograph of herself, and another, a faded one, of her mother.

She stood just an instant stretching her hands to the blaze as though she would have drawn protection from the heat of the fire; then she, too, sat down, choosing her father's writing-chair, a large comfortable revolving leathern chair. She looked very delicate, and in her white gown she had a *spirituelle* air. Her father had always loved to see her in white, and it was to please him that Christine had worn the simplest garments. The coldness and the dignity which George Narborough both admired and resented were absent from her to-night. Her expression was unconsciously one of pleading and the way her small white hands trembled was pathetic. She spoke first:

"I did not intend that you should have written to me," she said. "All through these many months I have been burdened with one great wish, and that was to have been able to communicate with you, to know what it is you have to say to me, but as you gave me no means of knowing where to find you I could not do this."

He looked at her with his brows drawn together for a brief spell, and then he said curtly:

"What did Fielding tell you?"

She sat forward in the chair.

"My father told me nothing. You forget," she added, "he died just an hour or so after you came here."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Death comes conveniently sometimes," he said.

Christine put up her hand.

"Please," she said half-brokenly, then with a great effort, "I must beg—that you will—that you will—remember my father is dead. I am here for the sole purpose of protecting his memory, of defending his good name. Yes," she went on half passionately, gripping the sides of the chair with her two hands, "I understand why you are here. In your letter you told me you looked to me for justice. If you have any real cause for grievance against my father I shall endeavour to set this right, but I shall be very glad if you will try and tell me the nature of your complaint without indulging in any bitter reproach of a man who is dead."

Dancroft laughed.

"It always seems to me such a ridiculous idea," he said, "to exact respect for a rogue simply because he happens to be lying in his grave! Besides, in this case as it happens, you are fully aware that I did not wait to attack a dead man. I came here and met your father face to face. I spoke to him as I mean to speak to you—plainly. I've no doubt he would have refused to listen to me if my case hadn't been so strong, but as it was I was in the position to force him to hear me out."

There was an unutterably bitter flavour in his words, a note of contempt which was terrible to Christine to hear. She sat silent a moment, and then said:

"Will you tell me everything?"

"I can put it into a few words," he answered her. "Your father was a thief. You don't like that," he added as the girl sitting in the chair started violently. "It's not pleasant to hear, I grant you, but then truth is seldom good to listen to! I wonder how much you know of your father's old life! Do you know where he came from? Do you know what his beginning was?"

Christine made him no answer.

"Well, it is not likely that he would have told you," the man went on, "but I thought it possible that you might have been enlightened in some way or other."

"I have never wanted to know anything about my father other than that which I could gather from my own feelings," Christine Fielding said, her tone now almost as hard as his. "He was to me everything that was good and honourable, tender, loving, and true. He was a man who was worshipped by those who worked under him. When he died it was as though the chief stone in some great building had been withdrawn, and though the building stands, the sense of sureness is not there. My father was a man who could not help doing good."

Dancroft laughed again, and there was a deliberate sneer in his laughter.

"Yes, he managed his charity very well, with

just sufficient advertisement and not too much. He was a clever man—a great man, if you will—but he was a bad man; you saw only one side of him." Then he asked roughly, "What do you know really of such a man? What do you know of his trickery, his unscrupulous greed? He went to his grave honoured according to the papers, regretted as a man of boundless charity, a man overflowing with love and sympathy for his fellow-creatures, and he was nothing but a clever adventurer and an unscrupulous scoundrel."

Christine got up, but he rose, too, quickly.

"I told you that I was going to speak plainly and if you'll take my advice you'll hear me out. I've treated you with amazing consideration. I've waited all these months before letting you know the truth. I could have taken it to others, I could have let lawyers handle this for me; but I had pledged my word to Fielding that I would deal with him direct, and as you now stand in his place I felt I would bring this to you first and give you a chance of acting straightforwardly. I may as well tell you," he added, "that if you don't see what is just and right it will be a case for others to handle."

"I am more than willing to do all in my power," Christine answered in a low voice; "but I will not listen to further abuse of my father."

He gave again that loose shrug of his shoulders and his lips curled.

"I am a rough man," he said, "and experience has stamped out all pretence in me. In my life it has been the fashion to call a spade a spade, and

not to have too much consideration for anything or anyone."

He moved away from her and paced the room.

Christine looked at him with aversion and fear. He was indeed a rough man and strong. His personality seemed to dwarf everything about him. She sat down and with her elbow on the table supported her head.

"I am still waiting," she said after awhile, and he paused in his walk on the other side of the table.

"It is necessary to go back a long way, to the beginning of it all," he said abruptly. "I am Lancashire born; my grandfather was a fairly prosperous man, he was a wholesale chemical manufacturer, as his father and grandfather had been before him, but my father, who was an only son, seems to have been from the very outset totally unfit for a commercial life." He paused, and a sigh broke from his lips unconsciously. The one who listened felt in that little pause the existence of a current of emotional feeling under the bitterness and the hardness. "As a lad," he said, "my father spent his days in working out scientific problems, in developing his own theories, in making experiments. He married young, a woman who adored him, and during my grandfather's lifetime things went smoothly enough; but the moment my father was his own master his fortune declined; in a very few years business fell away from him, and in a rash moment he sold out of it altogether."

He began to pace the room again, and Christine sat waiting for him to go on.

"I don't suppose you could understand," said Dancroft, "how easy it is to begin to go downhill when once you are well started that way. The money realized by the sale of my father's share in the old business seems to have vanished all too quickly: a natural circumstance, for with his unbusinesslike proclivities he combined an absolutely open-handed generosity. His small house and workshop were literally the home of all those who wanted charity and food. He had many who actually lived on him, and prominent among those was a youth named Ford, a young man who had been born in a workhouse and had spent an amazingly chequered career before he was sixteen. Ford was your father, and I want you to mark," said Dancroft, standing again by the table, "this special phase in the fellow's career. Round and about in the neighbourhood few people had a good word for young Ford, but that made no difference to my father. He opened his doors and took the charity lad in; he fed him, he clothed him. He did more than this; finding Ford an amazingly intelligent young fellow he gave him a post in his laboratory; he educated him, he shared his life with him."

Dancroft paused a moment, then went on with a furtive glance at the girl sitting there motionless a yard or two away from him. He said in a low voice:

"Of all those whom my father helped, this fellow, Harry Ford, was the only one who repaid his benefactor with rank ingratitude and with treachery. Standing here in this very room that night that I

came to him I forced a confession of truth from him."

Christine shivered faintly, but Dancroft was strung up now—passion and remembrance brought the words from his lips in a burning flood.

"There were times in those old days when money was needed so badly in our home that the question of the daily food was a problem that could not be solved; yet in my father's scientific researches nothing was stinted. Little by little my mother sold all that we had of any value—the few pictures and furniture and china that had been in her family for generations—and all that we had we shared with Ford; in truth, from what my mother has told me, he had become at this time absolutely indispensable to my father. To us children he stood as the living barrier which shut our father from us. I remember how I hated him! How jealous I was of him! He seemed to rob me of my proper place with my father!" He was silent it seemed a long while before he went on with his story. "We were brought up to regard the workshop as a sacred and a mysterious place," he said after that long pause. "If we had poor clothes and poorer food we were sustained by the certainty that some day there would arrive the most wonderful fortune born of the work done in that strange laboratory. There was in particular one secret in that home of chemistry which it was whispered would, when fully developed, be the turning-point in our lives: a piece of work which had occupied my father for years and to the perfection of which he had devoted his life itself.

We were told nothing more than this—that my father was at work on a discovery which, when made public, would result in world-wide fame and untold gold."

He caught his breath almost as though he sighed.

"You have let me see that you had a great love for your father, and by virtue of that you will perhaps understand the amazing love and devotion which we others lavished on the man who lived in our midst, yet was never one of us. . . . . For myself, I worshipped my father as though he had been a god. He was my ideal of all that was noble and great—a creature too finely conceived with his glorious dreams and visions to be jostled in the heartless, ugly, sordid crowd of ordinary human beings. It was destined that I was to see this man I worshipped die literally of neglect, a helpless and imbecile invalid needing the barest necessities of life—betrayed, deserted, and forgotten!"

Christine Fielding trembled; the penetrating anguish in that broken voice caused exquisite pain: tears sprang to her eyes—tears which would not be denied.

Dancroft was not looking at her; he had been carried away from the things of the moment. He was trembling and his voice had a broken and a hoarse sound.

"To realize the tragedy of my father's end you should have lived through all we suffered—you should have followed my mother in her daily task of renunciation, her efforts to be just to her

husband and children," he said when he could speak again. "You should have known the myriad difficulties of her position and so have appreciated what this end really signified to all of us. But even though you cannot follow all this you can realize the broad facts of such a case, and I doubt not you can find the proper words in which to describe the act of a man who, having been lifted from the gutter by a veritable angel, turned traitor to——"

Christine looked up, her tear-stained eyes were suddenly haggard, her face as white as death.

"No!" she said, with extraordinary passion. She pressed her hands to her heart for a moment, she felt sick with the fierceness of the pulsation. Then she said in a strained voice: "You have some reason for hating my father, and you think now that he is dead that you can come and tell me those terrible things against him; but you have no proof—no proof!"

Dancroft only smiled.

"My father's invention was sold secretly, and the man who sold it was his assistant, Ford. With the money which came to him from this traitor's work Ford bought a share in the business, which finally became his own property and which has attained to such gigantic proportions to-day."

Again Christine answered him hoarsely:

"It is not true—it could not be true!"

He stood looking at her as she faced him, quivering in every limb.

"Doubt if you will. It is natural, after all, that you should not believe this," he said. "A

little while ago I told you that you saw only one side of this man's character, and as you have grown up learning to honour him, it would not be reasonable if you took my word alone; but the proof you want is here," he tapped the breast-pocket of his coat as he spoke, "and I fancy it is strong enough to convince even you."

Christine stood and looked at the pocket which he had touched so significantly, and then she looked away. She was fighting a hopeless fight, and she knew it. Whatever might be the nature of the proof he would bring forward she had really no need of this evidence, for she realized now that with his own lips her father had made confession. Those few words which had caught her ear that bygone night when she had entered the room so unexpectedly, those words which had haunted her and tormented her took now their proper shape, ranking themselves as the strongest supporters of Dancroft's cause. But as a drowning person will clutch at a straw, so Christine caught wildly at anything that might come to her help now.

"I shall indeed need proof to convince me that my father was capable of this—this baseness," she said. "Moreover, there is a good deal which seems to me to need explanation. Firstly, why did you not bring forward this accusation years ago? Why, if you have had such a claim upon my father, did you leave his honour unchallenged all this long time?"

"For the best of all reasons," Dancroft answered abruptly; "because, although from the first my mother was convinced that Ford was the traitor,

the game had been played so carefully that no one could lodge a definite accusation against him." He paused a moment, then said: "My father's health had begun to fail months before the blow came which killed him in the end. Ford had left the house, ostensibly to ease us of the burden of supporting him, and had gone we none of us knew where; moreover, there was no one but this man who had been in my father's confidence, no other who had had definite knowledge of the wonderful dreams which had crowded his brain, none skilled as Ford had been in the mechanical labours of my father's daily life. All we knew was, that when my father learnt, as he did in due course, that the scheme at which he had been working for years —the invention, the child of his brain, had been taken from him and given to the world as the work of another person, it brought death to him. And when I think of those last, dark, miserable weeks of his existence, when I think of the poverty which fell on my mother and my sisters, when I trace the grey and sordid misery of these many years, I wonder to myself that I could have stood, as I did stand, and face the man who brought this all upon us and yet have kept my hands away from his throat. You have just told me," said Dancroft hoarsely, "of the wonderful charity which Henry Fielding carried on for years. You tell me that he was loved for his goodness, but in the long story of his magnificent prosperity there is not one single record of his having turned his thoughts back to the man he had robbed, to the people whom he had defrauded! My father's death did not touch

him; he deliberately let my mother starve. . . ." His voice failed, and the bitter speech was broken.

Christine had moved from the table, and was now standing by the fire. She was cold, cold with an aching bitterness which was worse than physical pain.

"And yet," James Dancroft said, recovering himself with an effort, "clever man as he was he should have been prepared for the inevitable! For he was not alone in his treachery. To do what Ford did," he said, "to carry out what he must have planned long before he left my father, he was obliged to have another to work with him. The man he used was a pitiful sort of an individual—a drunkard—and an incurable one; a man only too ready to sell his name and his honour. And to such a man must belong now for all time the credit the glory of the work which was born of my father's genius and perfected by years of struggling and unceasing labour! Of course," Dancroft said with his ready sneer, "Ford, or Fielding as he began to call himself, had calculated on being as easily rid of such an accomplice as he had changed his name and lost his old identity. Once used, the man could be discarded; if he were given sufficient money he would eventually drink himself into his grave. But as the exception sometimes proves the rule so this drunkard refused to die. It is a sort of consolation to know that his existence must have been a perpetual menace, a constant source of irritation, if not of positive danger."

Once again Christine shivered. Only an hour

or so before, standing looking up at her father's portrait, she had for the first time read the story of shadow and suffering and even fear written in his face. She was learning now how true, how bitterly true, the instinct of the artist had been to have brought that secret from the guarded heart to the eyes.

"There was, after all, some pretence of honour in this man, who sold himself to Fielding," Dancroft went on in his rough way, "for he seems to have recognized the enormity of the wrong done to my poor father, and all unknown to the powerful man who had mastered him for so long, he set himself the task of reparation. It was a slow and almost a hopeless business, because there were months at a time when this man was literally incapable; yet when the saner spells came, and he was able to defy the enemy drink, he took up the threads he had dropped. And so wearily and at a great cost of mind and money he finally succeeded. He found my mother and my sister (the only one of her children save myself who is alive to-day), he helped them; he was instrumental in bringing me back to England—I had gone out as a stoker on one of the P. and O. boats just about then—and when he died I was with him alone and wrote down the confession he made. That confession is with me now"—once again he tapped his pocket—"and pinned to it is one from your father," he added. "Will you read these?"

Christine looked at him; her eyes had a dazed expression. She shook her head.

"No."

His dark face flushed and his eyes shone.

"You still doubt?" he said.

She shook her head again, and again she said: "No."

Moving round, she stood with her hands leaning on the back of the chair.

"That last night my father was with me," she said in a low voice, "he left me a letter. In that letter he told me that you had come to him with business which required immediate attention; that he was leaving me because of that business—leaving me custodian of all that belonged to him. I don't know whether the knowledge of approaching death was on him then—I shall never know this, but I do know that my father left me a great duty; and more than this," the girl said, with a break in her voice, "whilst I have been listening to you I have been remembering certain hours which my father and I spent alone in this room. I have seen his dear face quite clearly; I have even felt that he was near me, and I know now that there was always something on his heart, something which, like his living grief for my dead mother, never, never left him!"

She ceased abruptly, and Dancroft waited for her to say more.

Her next words were a surprise.

"What do you wish done?" she asked. "As my father said, I say: 'There shall be restitution, full and complete.' Show me how I am to do this?"

CHAPTER IX

DANCROFT frowned and then stood looking at her with a strange expression in his eyes.

He knew she was beautiful in this moment, and the sentient quality of her beauty made his heart thrill; and yet it was not wholly her physical charm which had the power to move him. She represented to him a living ideal; she embodied those vague visionary creatures of his dreams and thoughts. He was by nature acutely sensitive to what was illuminating and poetical. Even when his life had been most dark and desolate, and his daily existence humiliating in the greatest degree, this power of losing the reality of his misery in dreams had belonged to him. It was a trait inherited from his father, and had been at once his solace in misfortune and his protection from that moral deterioration which, to a weaker man subjected to the dreadful experiences which had fallen to his lot, would have been practically inevitable. He felt his heart stir within him as he looked now on Christine.

There was a flush on her pale face and a curious expression in her eyes, a look of exaltation befitting

one whose spirit is prepared to make an amazing sacrifice. They stood a moment in a silence which neither could break. Then the fact that she was strung up to such a sacrifice for one whom he had always regarded as being absolutely unworthy, the knowledge that the dead could claim such loyalty, the fact that such a man could have had such a child, could have inspired such beautiful and faithful love, inflamed his ready anger, and provoked another feeling curiously akin to jealousy.

"You speak as your father spoke," he answered her in his roughest way, "and I answer you as I answered him. What restitution can there be for such a wrong? Do you suppose all the money in the world could give back to my mother all that she has lost? It can't make the dead live again. As for me," he stretched out his hands, work-stained and disfigured. "Can you make these straight and smooth like your father's hands?" he asked. "Can you take away from me the horrors I have seen—the unutterable degradation to which I have fallen at times merely to get bread to put in my mouth? Restitution! The word's a farce! If you gave up every farthing you have you couldn't even begin to make things as they ought to have been!"

He spoke so roughly, so savagely, that the girl drew back from him, and at that moment there was a tap at the door, and Casson opened it.

"Did you ring, miss?" he asked. "Will you take coffee here?"

The man standing apart from Christine Fielding looked at her in almost a startled fashion. The

way in which she responded to this conventional interruption—the apparent ease with which she covered her agitation, her nervous excitement, and her mental suffering—seemed very wonderful to him.

"I did not ring," she said, "but you can bring the coffee."

Casson withdrew and shut the door quietly; there was a perturbed look on his face. He had not stooped to listen, at the same time his curiosity had been aroused. This man was a strange kind of visitor to come to Hunston Manor at any time, and especially at such an hour. However, the butler kept his thoughts to himself, and instead of deputing one of the footmen to take the coffee tray into the library, resolved to carry it himself.

The advent of the servant had come almost opportunely to Christine.

As Casson closed the door she sat down again in the arm-chair and looked thoughtfully at her adversary.

"You must forgive me, Mr. Dancroft, if I suggest to you that you are scarcely reasonable. In your letter, and at the commencement of our interview, you told me bluntly that you had come here for one purpose only—to exact justice. I have just told you that I am prepared to do everything in my power to meet you, and you answer that nothing I can do will be of the least use."

She still looked very pale, but the expression in her eyes had changed, and she held her head proudly.

The man frowned. Her dignity, her proud aloof-

ness, her calmness, put his own manner in an unpleasant light. He felt uncouth and awkward, and was irritated at realizing this.

"There will be plenty for you to do—make no mistake about that," he answered sullenly. "I only wanted to drive home to you if I could, how pitifully poor this late attempt at settling things must be, no matter what you do."

Miss Fielding sat very still; after a pause she said:

"But at least you must have *some* idea in your mind as to what you expect me to do? I don't suppose that you came here simply to give yourself the satisfaction of humiliating my father's memory."

"I'm not so sure about that!" he answered her fiercely. "I begin to think there is one good thing possible in this world, and that is revenge, even if the revenge gets no further than telling the ugly truth. It sounds melodramatic, doesn't it?—like an old-fashioned play; but it isn't out of date, for all that!" Then he paused for an instant.

"Of course, I understand you," he said abruptly, coming a step or two nearer. "You are quite prepared to give us all the money we may want, just to settle this matter right away. You think money means so much to us that it can shut our lips and keep them shut for ever! Well, suppose we knock that idea on the head? Suppose I tell you that we aren't prepared to deal with you, but that we mean to let the world rush in here—that we mean to let everybody know the truth

about this sainted father of yours? What have you got to say then?"

Christine lifted her hand with a warning gesture, and he ceased speaking as the door was opened again and Casson came in, bearing the tray with coffee and liqueurs. He brought Christine a message also.

"Sir George Narborough has just rung up, miss. He says he won't trouble you to go to the telephone; he only wishes to know how you are, after your journey. He hopes you are not very tired."

Christine's white face coloured painfully.

"Please thank Sir George," she said, "and say I am a little tired, but I hope to be quite rested to-morrow."

As the butler went away a second time Christine rose and moved to the table on which the coffee tray stood.

Like a pang, the remembrance flashed upon her of how many, many times she had stood in like fashion and poured out a cup of coffee for her father, and the significant realization of her separation from him became at this moment a veritable anguish. The yearning for his presence—for protection and comfort, for the mere touch of his hand—was so great that her self-control went suddenly.

She turned swiftly aside and walked to the window. The light was dim there, and she covered her face with her hands.

Dancroft watched her, and his brows contracted. He picked up his felt hat, and he turned it over and over in his hands with a movement suggestive

of discomfort—it might have been even uneasiness. Suddenly he spoke: his voice was quite changed; its rough tone was gone.

"If you are tired now I can come back again."

But the girl for answer turned round and moved once more into the circle of light.

"I would rather that we came to some kind of settlement to-night, Mr. Dancroft," she said, puting her hand to her aching head. "I was wrong just now when I refused to read those papers you have brought. If you will give them to me now I will read them."

He took a note-case out of his pocket and extracted two papers.

"This is what your father wrote," he said, "according to my dictation."

He watched the girl as she read both papers. The one was a brief statement of the facts which he had given her; the other an almost brutally frank confession of a great wrong.

As she came to the end and looked down through her tears at her father's signature, Christine suddenly stooped and put her lips to the name; then she folded the papers and handed them back.

"I must really insist that you will give me some idea of how you expect me to act in this matter. Because you must remember I occupy a position of some responsibility. I have many dependent on me, many duties which I must fulfil."

"You had better go to rest," was his abrupt answer. "You have had enough for to-night."

But she persisted. There was an astonishing amount of firmness about her.

"In all this," she said, "your mother figures very largely, and I suppose you are acting with her?"

He shook his head.

"No. I have told my mother very little. I waited till I had seen you. Naturally our interests are identical, but I wanted to be quite sure." He paused, then he said abruptly: "My mother isn't an easy woman, but that's only to be expected when one remembers all she's gone through."

"But now that you have seen me," said Christine, "you are going to tell her the whole story."

He said: "Yes."

There was silence between them again, and then Dancroft spoke:

"Though I have come for justice, I am ready to be just myself. You're hardly more than a girl, and this is a big matter to tackle, as you've just said you've a good deal of responsibility on your shoulders. You had best have some advice. There is someone, I suppose, in your life to whom you could speak? Someone you could trust?"

He had before him as he spoke the vivid recollection of George Narborough: firstly, when he had taken the girl in his arms with so much authority the night of her father's death, and again when he had been with her on board the boat. He looked at her intently as he spoke, but Christine did not change colour; her face was pale and grave.

"No, I have no one, and in any case I should prefer to do this alone," she answered.

Dancroft was silent. His eyes had dropped,

and he stood restlessly striking his felt hat against the palm of his hand. When he spoke he said:

"It will be best for you to meet my mother; whatever is to be arranged will be decided by her. She is in London."

"I will go to her to-morrow," said Christine in that strained, tired voice.

But he shook his head at this.

"No; she'll come to you. I want her to come; I want her to see the kind of place, or one of them, in which Henry Fielding lived." In his former rough way he said: "Good-night," and moved towards the door.

Christine followed him.

"Are you sure—of coming to-morrow? Will you let it be early? So—so much depends on my interview with your mother" Then just as he reached the door, she said: "You are returning to town to-night, you will not walk? The brougham can be got ready at once or—or the motor."

"I am used to walking," he answered her curtly, and this time he opened the door and passed out.

Casson came forward out of the shadow of the hall to open the entrance door for him. He said, "Good-night, sir," but Dancroft made no answer.

The butler looked after him as he strode away, with a perplexed expression; then he closed the door and went down the passage to the study.

Christine was standing by the fire.

"Dr. Brathmore was here just ten minutes ago, miss; but I told him I thought you were too tired to see anyone now."

Miss Fielding said: "Thank you, Casson; I am just going to bed."

She spoke composedly.

"You haven't taken any coffee, miss. Shall I get you a little fresh, or would you like something else?"

"Nothing, thank you, Casson. I am only tired."

As he was passing down with the tray Casson said:

"Sir George wished me to tell you, miss, that he'd ring you up about ten to-morrow morning."

Christine said nothing. She was leaning forward with her elbow on the projecting ledge of the oaken mantelshelf, and was looking into the fire; there was something unutterably pathetic about her attitude.

As he gave the tray he carried to one of his underlings, the butler said to himself:

"I'm sorry now I didn't let the doctor come in."

And yet in a dim, far-off sort of way Casson seemed to realize that the skill of the doctor could have done very little for his young mistress to-night.

CHAPTER X

MRS. DUDWORTH had invited Sir George to dine with her the day following her arrival in town.

Her house in town had been let for the season, so she put up at an hotel, and she had at once chosen some cheerful rooms for Christine when she should arrive. Mrs. Dudworth had hesitated at first between a hotel and the big town house which Henry Fielding had used so seldom; but loyal to her idea of drawing Christine away gradually from too close an adherence to old associations, she had renounced the idea of the house; in fact, she intended to advise Christine to get rid of this part of her property.

"What you want," she said, discussing the matter with George Narborough, "is a brighter house and one a little more central. Poor Henry had a mania for big rooms and lofty ceilings, and fashion was the last thing he considered; but your wife must be in the fashion, of course!"

Sir George accepted the flattery conveyed in this speech, but at the same time, simply from a spirit of contradiction, he proceeded to give his views about the future.

"When I have seen this house," he said, "I shall know better what to decide. Possibly I may find it just what we require."

It was this tone of his, this arrogance, which so annoyed Margaret Dudworth, and which argued so uncomfortably for the future. However, like a wise woman, she suffered everything in silence, and on this particular occasion she went out of her way to be particularly nice to the young man, because she felt that Christine's immediate departure for the country had really been a great disappointment to him.

"Have you heard from Christine?" asked Narborough, the moment he arrived.

Mrs. Dudworth said "No," very quickly, and in the same breath asked: "Have you?"

He shook his head.

"I rang up on the telephone late yesterday, and again this morning, to inquire how she was; yesterday Casson spoke, and this morning her maid answered me. The maid said Christine was well, so I suppose she is all right; but I certainly thought she would have spoken to me herself. I mean to go down to Hunston to-morrow, Peggy, you know, and bring Christine up. My mother is coming to town this week on purpose to meet her."

Mrs. Dudworth sighed a little impatiently. Truth to tell, she was just a little hurt that Christine had not sent her one word after reaching Hunston Manor: a telegram would have sufficed. This, however, she kept to herself. To avoid friction or controversy between them, Mrs. Dudworth had asked one or two other people to dine with Roger

and herself, and afterwards proposed a theatre. Sir George took her back to the hotel after the theatre. As they passed into Mrs. Dudworth's sitting-room, his eye caught at once the sight of a letter in Christine's handwriting waiting on the table. Margaret Dudworth was kissing her boy and sending him to bed. Sir George picked up the letter hurriedly and would have opened it, but turning at that moment, the rightful owner of it caught him in the act and snatched it from him.

"You will find yours waiting for you; this is mine," she said laughingly.

"Aren't you going to open Christine's letter?" asked Narborough, a moment or two later. But Mrs. Dudworth shook her head with a laugh.

"No; be content with your own."

Sir George bit his lip a little savagely.

"How do I know that there will be any letter? Peggy, I'm getting so sick of all this! The position is becoming unbearable!"

Mrs. Dudworth threw her evening cloak on to the sofa.

"Then, my dear man," she said a little coldly, "the remedy is in your own hands."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you are not satisfied with Christine and her ways, let there be an end to your engagement."

"Has she deputed you to say this to me?" the man asked in a voice full of anger.

"No, she has not," Margaret Dudworth said. "Christine would never pass a matter of that sort over to a second person. I speak as I feel."

Sir George had turned red and now had grown very pale.

"Christine will find that I am not a person to be disposed of so easily. She has engaged herself to me, and I shall hold her to her word."

"Because you love her so much—or because——"

The sentence was not finished, but as she bent over a bowl of flowers, Mrs. Dudworth's hand closed a little more tightly over Christine's letter.

"I am going to be very straightforward with you, George," she said, "and I believe I am going to say things which you won't like; but I must say them, all the same. Do you know, I think you are exacting too much. You want now to take every single thought of Christine's and control it. My dear man, the thing is impossible—absolutely impossible! Grant, if you will, that Henry spoilt her, the fact remains that Christine has had a life of extraordinary freedom and amazing happiness, and I foresee nothing but misery from your marriage unless you change your present tactics."

"Christine is a child," said Narborough doggedly, "and children must learn obedience." Then he said hardly: "You can't go back on what you told me, Peggy; you assured me that Fielding was anxious that I should propose to Christine, and if her father had these views, I don't think anybody else's opinion matters."

"Perhaps not." Mrs. Dudworth paused, then she said in a low voice: "Still, just because I love this girl so much, and because I am fond of you, George,

I don't want to see you, too, make a hash of things."

"A fellow can't do more than I've done," said the man testily. "Whenever she has given me half a chance I've tried my best to be nice; but Christine has a way of freezing one up; she is so cold, and I am afraid she has grown to think too much of herself. Of course, it is a ridiculous idea, but sometimes I have thought that perhaps she doesn't feel I'm big enough. I mean, that she imagines perhaps she ought to marry a chap like Darlington, for instance, with a title as old as the hills."

"You dear, foolish thing," said Mrs. Dudworth. "How little you know her! Christine is the most unworldly creature possible. She has been brought up so simply that money means nothing to her."

Sir George picked up his overcoat and slipped it on.

"Well, I'm going down to fetch her to-morrow."

"We promised her two whole days," said Mrs. Dudworth.

"To-morrow evening, then."

"I would go down with you," said Mrs. Dudworth, "but I half promised Roger to go back with him."

"Oh! I think I had better go alone." He held out his hand, and as he did so he said: "You are misjudging me just a bit, Peggy; I do care for her, and I'm in earnest. I'll try and be as patient as I possibly can, but I'm not going to give Christine

up. She gave herself and her future into my hands, and I hold them there."

"Good boy," said Mrs. Dudworth, with a laugh that was rather forced. "That is the right way to talk."

But she did not laugh when she was alone. She felt extraordinarily uneasy.

"If Christine only had someone else," she said to herself; "someone belonging to her who would have the right to act for her, someone who could be stronger than I am. One thing is very sure, there is no hope in George. He is pig-headed, and I begin to be half afraid he could be cruel."

She went back to the fireplace and stood a moment, looking into the red embers; then with a little sigh she opened Christine's letter.

It consisted of only a few lines:

"DEAREST (the girl had written),—Forgive me for not writing to you earlier than this. I have had matters of great importance to attend to since my arrival here yesterday, matters so big that I cannot touch on them now. I shall see you soon, and then I will explain better. I write now to tell you that I am going away from Hunston for a couple of days. I will let you know when I return, and when we can meet.

"God bless you, Peggy, my darling, think always of me as

"Your very loving

"CHRISTINE."

* * * * * *

Sir George was staying for the time being at his mother's house, although Lady Ellen was still in the country. When he reached the house this night he looked eagerly at the letters awaiting him, and pounced on the one lying on the top which bore Christine's handwriting. He tore the letter open, standing in the hall, and when he had read through the few lines he swore sharply to himself.

Christine had written hurriedly, stating that she had found an unexpected amount of business which required her attention, and that she was afraid she would not be able to see him for a few days. Sir George felt hot with anger.

He went up to his own suite of rooms and flung the letters he had brought on to the table; but as he was pacing the room impatiently and moodily, he glanced at these letters, and with a shrug of his shoulders and another ugly word, picked up an envelope and looked at it with a sneer on his lips.

It was some time since Constance Knox had written to him, except when his mother used her as a secretary. He frowned a little as he saw the address of a fashionable hotel stamped on the flap of the envelope.

With an impatient exclamation he tore open the note, and as he read it his brows contracted sharply in a frown.

"DEAR SIR GEORGE (Miss Knox wrote),—You will no doubt have heard from your mother that I am no longer staying with her. I have parted from Lady Ellen with very sincere regret, for she

has always treated me with the greatest consideration. Indeed, I would have remained with her if I had been permitted to do so; but my uncle, whose unexpected coming has made such a difference in my life, has planned out a new career for me. My reason for writing to you is to ask you if by chance you have not destroyed them (which no doubt you have), you will be so good as to return to me certain rather stupid letters which I wrote a year ago. Most women, you know, have their sentimental moments, and when they are lonely and not too happy they are apt to do foolish things. That puts my case in a nutshell. We are staying here for another few days, then we are going to motor through Brittany; later, we shall go to Paris and on to Venice and a tour through Italy.—Believe me, yours very sincerely,

"CONSTANCE KNOX."

Narborough was conscious of a most uncomfortable sensation. The matter, of course, did not touch him seriously; still, he felt as if someone or something had played him an ugly trick. It surprised him enormously, and annoyed him, too, in a sense, to realize that Constance Knox should be independent. In truth, if Sir George had analyzed his thoughts, he would have found that of late he had been regarding Miss Knox's undoubted attachment to himself with a certain amount of complacency. It had been certainly agreeable, in the face of Christine's curious treatment of himself, to have been able to remember that there existed another woman who, in common parlance,

was breaking her heart for his sake. He recalled now that his mother had told him something about some relations with whom Constance was in correspondence, but he had not given the matter much heed, and her letter, therefore, found him quite unprepared for the news it conveyed.

Of course, it was very ridiculous of him to be annoyed at Miss Knox's good fortune; but he was not in a mood to prevaricate with himself, and this letter coming at the same time as Christine's most unsatisfactory one, worked his ill-temper into a veritable rage; and it was on Christine he vented the force of his anger. That Miss Fielding expected him to obey her wishes was very evident, but in this, at least, Sir George Narborough intended to teach her a lesson.

He scribbled a few words to Mrs. Dudworth before he went to bed, and he let her see that he was extremely annoyed.

"I cannot conceive what kind of business it is that Christine has to look after, but I mean to go down to-morrow as I told you."

He half expected some protest to this note, but none came, and on the following afternoon he travelled down to Hunston.

He had to drive up to the house in a fly, since he had thought it wiser not to announce that he was coming.

When he reached the house, however, and passed into the hall with an air of mastership, he found that he had taken a journey for nothing, for Miss Fielding was not at Hunston.

Sir George did not hesitate to put Casson through

a thorough examination, and the butler told him all he knew.

"Miss Fielding went away early this morning, sir. No, sir, she did not take her maid with her. She said she might be back to-morrow or the next day, she wasn't quite sure, but she would let us know. I made so bold, sir, as to ask if I might attend her, but she said as she did not want any one. She added, sir," said Casson in his quiet way, "that she was about to do some very important work which the master had left her."

Then the butler put himself and the household at Sir George Narborough's disposal, but it appeared that Sir George had no intention of remaining. He ordered the motor to be got ready, and he drove away, leaving Casson with the unpleasant sensation that when this young man should be really master at Hunston Manor things would go very differently to the pleasant way in which they had gone during Henry Fielding's lifetime.

CHAPTER XI

CHRISTINE had not closed her eyes all that night following on her interview with Dancroft. She went to bed, but sleep was impossible, and when 'Barker' came to call her she was already up and dressed.

James Dancroft had left her with the understanding that he would communicate with her to let her know when his mother would arrive, and the morning was still young when a note was brought to her by a boy on a bicycle. The note was from Dancroft.

"On thinking matters over," he wrote; and from the address on the notepaper, it was evident that he had put up for the night at the nearest town—"I have come to the conclusion that it will be better for you to go to London and see my mother. She will then give you her own wishes. Possibly she may not desire to come down here just for the moment." He then wrote the address in London where she would find his mother, and added: "I shall be glad if you will go up as early as you conveniently can to-day. I am leaving at once for London, and we can meet there."

So Christine gave her maid orders to put a few things into her travelling-bag.

Barker heard of her mistress's departure alone with great surprise and even anxiety.

"Please let me come with you, Miss Christine," she begged, but Christine was firm.

"I don't know that I shall be away very long; in any case I can take care of myself." Then she added, for she felt that the servants required some little explanation from her: "It is business which is taking me, Barker, very, very important business which my dear father would have done if he had lived, and which I must do in his place."

And these words in a sense satisfied the maid, for she, better than all, perhaps, was in the position to know what the significance of Christine's devotion to her father's memory really was.

It was strange to the girl to find herself quite alone. She shrank into a corner of the railway carriage and closed her eyes wearily. The real meaning of what lay immediately in front of her had not come to her as yet; all connection with Dancroft was blurred except the one big fact, that great inexorable fact that the father she mourned, the father whom she had adored, had achieved his greatness by an act of treachery, and that it had never been granted to him to make atonement. And beyond this one big fact there was the nervous, conscious resolution, the determination no matter what it cost her to wipe out, if she could, this stain from her father's memory, to act as she was convinced he would have acted,

to restore as she was equally convinced he would have restored.

It was not until she had alighted from the train at the London terminus that she realized that she was about to meet a new, and perhaps a more formidable enemy.

The crowd at the station bewildered her; she hardly knew which way to turn, and it was with a sensation of relief that she found herself addressed, and turning saw James Dancroft standing beside her.

"I came up in the same train," he said in his curt way, "and as I saw you standing here I thought I might be of some use."

He hailed a cab as he spoke, but when he had put Christine into it he did not follow her. Instead, he mounted the box beside the driver.

The girl's nervousness increased as the cab rolled away and carried her through a labyrinth of streets all wearing the same dull aspect. It seemed to her as if this journey was interminable, yet when at last they stopped in front of a quiet-looking hotel a wild sense of despair settled upon her, and she had a natural yearning for someone belonging to her to be with her now.

As the cab door was opened, however, she stepped out bravely, and followed Dancroft into the hall.

He paused just for a moment when they were inside and no one was in hearing.

"I must prepare you," he said hurriedly. "You will find my mother very harsh, very bitter. If she tries you too much you must remember what

she has suffered, and you must endeavour to put yourself in her place."

"Thank you," said Christine, "I am prepared for everything."

He looked at her for a moment, and frowned slightly; then, without another word, he led the way indoors. He left Christine in the drawing-room—a depressing apartment, with no air and very little light.

"If you will wait here," he said, "I'll see if my mother is ready to receive you."

Christine did not sit down—she stood and looked out of the window, and she shivered as she stood. There was a racking pain in her head, and she felt faint and horribly weary, but above all she felt frightened. She had told him that she was prepared; but in her heart she knew that she was a long way from being ready to suffer further and perhaps inevitable abuse of her father.

He returned very soon.

"Will you come now?" he said.

And if Christine had looked at him she would have noticed that he was very pale.

She followed him obediently, mounting the dark, narrow staircase with knees which trembled beneath her.

She was never conscious how she passed into the room into which he led her. Just for the moment all was blurred; then she awakened to the knowledge that two eyes were resting on her with an expression so vindictive, so terrible, that she shrank back involuntarily.

James Dancroft moved forward quickly and pushed a chair towards her.

"Won't you sit down?" he asked.

But Christine shook her head.

"I prefer to stand."

She did, however, rest her black-gloved hand on *the back of the chair, and was vaguely glad of the* support.

"Let her stand, James," said the old woman, who was sitting by the fireplace. She was a very thin woman, and her age was the age which comes from suffering, from constant unremitting toil, from lack of comfort, lack even of those things which are absolutely necessary to the life of most ordinary people. About her shoulders there was a grey shawl, and on her head a widow's cap, and the skin of her face seemed as grey as the shawl. She was so thin, she looked so frail, only that burning fire in her eye spoke of strength.

"Yes, let her stand," she said.

Though she did not look in that direction, Christine was conscious that another woman was in the room standing by the window, conscious that another pair of eyes was regarding her intently and with curiosity.

Mrs. Dancroft's fingers were plucking nervously at the fringe of her shawl.

"So," she said, after a painful pause, "so you are Henry Fielding's daughter—daughter of that abominable thief and treacherous wretch; and you have come here of your own free will no doubt to hear what I have got to say about him."

Christine looked into those terrible eyes and courage surged into her heart.

"No," she said, "I have not come here to listen to your hatred of my father; I have come here because I feel it my duty to consult you, to know your wishes, so that I may do what my beloved *father would have done had he been alive.*"

The old woman sneered back.

"That's not a good beginning," she said. "Your beloved father lived a good many years, and there is no record of his having tried to do what we mean to make you do."

Christine coloured hotly.

"You are making an assertion," she said. "What proof have you that my father did not try to make atonement? You judge him by one act. I am not going to defend that act. If I could give my life to wipe it out I would do that gladly; but you never knew the man at whom you sneer so easily as I knew him. You have taught yourself to hate him, and because of that you condemn him absolutely."

The old woman cut into the speech.

"James," she said, "I will not be insulted."

The man standing by the table shivered as he saw the shiver run through Christine's slender figure.

"I think——" Then he spoke with an effort: "I think," he said, "that we make a mistake by starting with recrimination. Miss Fielding has come here, mother, to discuss the future."

The young woman at the window moved forward here.

"Yes," she said, "for goodness sake let us get to the future; what is done is so old; I'm tired of it, I want something new, something that means life."

Mrs. Dancroft turned on her son and on her daughter.

"You had better leave us," she said with a note of cold passion in her voice. "This is my affair, and I am not going to be dictated to by any one of you. I shall say what I please and when I please, and I'd best warn you," she said, looking again at Christine, "that I don't mean to spare you. You stand in the place of your father to me, and I shall deal with you as I should have dealt with him." The girl had turned and left the room with a flounce, but Dancroft had not moved. He was looking at Christine, and Mrs. Dancroft was looking at her son.

"James," she said very distinctly, "you'd best follow Anne. You're not wanted here."

The man met his mother's eyes.

"This is my business as well as your's, mother, and I'm going to stay."

The old woman plucked at her shawl, and then she turned on Christine.

"If he stays he'll do nothing to help you—let that be very clear. As you're the child of a traitor, it would be queer if you didn't think to make use of anything or anyone who'd be easily fooled by you, but my son won't be of much use. You've got me to deal with, and there's very little mercy in my heart for anyone that belonged to that cur and lying thief."

The man made an involuntary movement forward as though he would indeed have offered tangible protection to the girl who stood facing his mother. But Christine had her courage well in hand.

"I am not afraid," she said, answering the old woman coldly and with dignity. "I am ready to meet everything which must come!"

CHAPTER XII

MISS FIELDING returned to Hunston Manor an hour or so after Sir George Narborough had been there. A telegram announcing her arrival was received, and the motor-car was sent to the station to fetch her.

Christine looked quite worn out when she reached her home, and without exactly understanding why such a feeling should come, Casson was sensible of a great relief that Sir George had not waited on the chance of seeing his young mistress.

Miss Fielding heard of Narborough's visit in silence, and opened such letters as were waiting for her. The afternoon post had brought a few loving words from Margaret Dudworth. Tears rushed to Christine's hot aching eyes as she realized once again how tenderly she was loved by this woman, and with what exquisite tact Mrs. Dudworth treated her.

"I will write to Peggy," she said to herself as she put aside the letter, "and in a little while—when—when things are settled here, I will get her to come to me."

Though she was fatigued a nervous excitement thrilled Christine. She dressed for dinner and came downstairs and sat in solitary state in the big dining-room, but her eating was only a pretence. There was far, far too much pressing on her heart and on her mind.

When coffee was brought to her, she told Casson that she would have it in the library, the room which for ever would be fraught with such poignant memories; and when Casson had waited on her, she signified to the servant that she wished to speak to him.

"I want to let you know," she said, "and I want you to let the others know, that two days hence I shall have some guests here who may stay a very long time; they—they are people who had a very great claim on my father, and for whom my father intended to do all in his power had he lived. Now that he is not here to do this, it is my duty to act for him; and, Casson, I wanted to say to you before Mrs. Dancroft and her daughter come, that I shall regard it as a personal favour if you and all of those who work with you will do the best in your power to make the life comfortable for—for everybody. Things may be difficult sometimes, and you are sure to feel the change—but——" she broke off there.

"You may rely on me, Miss Christine," the butler said; "and I am sure I can answer for all the rest. There isn't a one who wouldn't do their best to please you."

Christine thanked the man, and her lips quivered as she did so; then when she was alone, she sat

down by her father's writing-table and for a time putting her elbows on the table, she rested her head on her hands.

In this tranquil, familiar, well-loved place she was lured into a spell of dreamy forgetfulness. It was a moment of pause and Christine felt that she needed this pause, for the future which lay just beyond threatened to tax her courage, her strength, and her pride almost beyond endurance. Just for a little while she put thought away and drifted into a kind of lethargy. It was the natural outcome of her bodily and mental fatigue. She had gone through so much since she had left Hunston in the morning. Just for a little while all that she had to remember, all that she had to do, became blurred. But this spell of peace was short-lived, for even as she sat there with her head resting on her hands, Casson came back, and brought a message to say that Sir George Narborough was at the telephone and wished to speak to her.

Christine got up and her face was hot with colour; then she sat down weakly.

"I—I don't feel equal to speaking through the telephone to-night, Casson," she said. There was almost an appeal in her voice. And quickly the servant answered to that appeal:

"I am quite sure you are not fit for it, miss. I'll just tell Sir George as you have gone to your room, being tired out, and we do not like to disturb you."

And he turned and went away before Christine could offer any protest to this.

Her heart beat nervously once again. She was

fully re-awakened now not only to all the practical discomfort and misery which the invasion of her home by these alien people must signify, but awake to the fact that she had another great duty to perform, one which she must do at once.

Her marriage with George Narborough was now practically impossible. During the last few months she had never tried to analyze her feelings where this man was concerned. He had certainly attracted her in the beginning and his attentions had flattered her. If life had continued in the old simple, happy fashion, possibly Christine might have awakened to the knowledge that she required more from the man who was to be her husband than graceful attentions. But even though she had felt again and again that George Narborough was a man lacking in many of those qualities which appealed to her, still the fact that her father had wished her to marry him, and, again, the fact that she had freely entered into an engagement with him, signified a great bond. Apart from this altogether Christine was really very lonely, and in cutting herself adrift from Sir George she would be parting with one who (even though only for a little while) had at least occupied an intimate and an important place in her life.

She had never stopped to ask herself if she had been in love with this man. Since her father's death everything about her had been changed, but her nature was so sweet in itself, that she could not but be touched by the pertinacity of Sir George and by the constant assurance of his devotion. For it must be remembered, that however annoyed and irri-

tated Narborough had been by the events of the last few months, he had been careful to veil this from Christine. To Mrs. Dudworth he had, as we know, given full vent to his feelings, but with the girl he had been very careful; and Christine's remembrance of him was tinged, therefore, now with a certain amount of pathos.

She had, moreover, a certain admiration for his practical view of life; and there came to her a sharp regret that she could not put upon his shoulders the burden which she had to carry. She felt surely that Sir George Narborough would have a very quick way of dealing with Mrs. Dancroft. To share with him the secret which now was poisoning her life was, however, absolutely out of the question.

"Some day, perhaps, I may be able to tell Peggy, but no one else. Oh! no one else."

The need, however, to let Sir George know that her engagement could not possibly continue had become imperative.

Brushing the tears away from her eyes, therefore, Christine took up her pen and wrote to him. She did not stop to choose her words, she wrote simply, very gently, and yet with decision, announcing that circumstances of a wholly unexpected nature had arisen in her life which compelled her to break her engagement.

She indulged in no expressions of sentiment, but she hoped that the man would be able to discern the heaviness of spirit and regret with which this letter was charged.

Tears were rolling down her face again as she put it into an envelope and addressed it, and then

she scribbled a very blurred note to Mrs. Dudworth.

"DEAREST (she wrote),—I have come back again this evening. My business did not keep me as long as I expected. I want you, Peggy, darling, to try and make George understand that my letter is not written from caprice or that I have changed things for any other reason except that which I have given him. Some day perhaps I may be able to tell you all I have gone through since my father's death; but now, Peggy dear, all I can tell you is that I am not free to marry George; that, indeed, my life from to-night will be altogether different. I wrote you in my last letter that I had to do some work which Daddy left me to do. This work takes the form of giving a place in my home to some people who have a right to come here; people who belong to his old life, those days about which you and I never knew anything. You must not think I am being imposed upon; my duty is too clear for that. Whatever might have been doubtful and difficult to understand was made quite intelligible to me by my father's last letter. I don't want George to be very unhappy. I feel as if I had treated him very hardly; he has been so kind and good and patient with me. It will seem strange to you that I should say I have never appreciated his kindness and his patience so much as I do to-night, when I have written separating myself from him.

"Dearest Peggy, I am very unhappy in one sense, and yet most happy in another, because I feel that

Daddy relied on me to do what I am doing and that now his soul will be at peace."

When this letter was sealed, Christine got up and walked about the room for a little while. She was crying silently. She felt as if she were saying good-bye to all that had belonged to her happy childhood and girlhood. She yearned for tangible comfort, for tender words. Peggy would come to her, she knew that, but sweet and consoling as Peggy would be, there was the natural craving for something stronger, for the love which George Narborough had professed with so much fervour. In this, the hour when she sent him away, she found herself clinging to him, and just for a little while she broke down at the thought of what she had done. Nevertheless, though her face was tear-stained, she was quite calm when Casson came a little later.

"It is too late to send these letters to-night, Casson," Christine said, "but I want them to go first thing in the morning; someone had better ride over to the town with them."

"I'll take them myself, Miss Christine," Casson said, and there was something like affection in his glance as he followed his young mistress out of the library into the hall, and then stood and watched her as she passed up the staircase to her own room.

CHAPTER XIII

THE one day which intervened, before the coming of those whom Christine had bitter reason to call her enemies, was occupied largely in discussing business arrangements with the head of the London office, which controlled the vast business from which she derived her wealth.

When she had left the Dancrofts the day before, Christine had driven to the office in the City. She had put before the manager her desire that some responsible post should be found at once for a young man in whom she was very much interested.

She had found very little opposition to the fulfilment of this wish, only it was pointed out to her that there was really no available opening at the moment, except perhaps in one of the Colonial branches.

Christine had been too fatigued, too nervous and excited to go thoroughly into the matter, so she had desired that the head of the office should come down to Hunston on the following day. She felt that she might speak in a sense openly to this man, who had worked for so many years with

her father, and in whom she knew Henry Fielding had reposed great confidence and reliance.

"I am not really asking you to put Mr. Dancroft into another person's place," she said, when this Mr. Millward arrived and the matter was discussed between them. "All I require is that a post shall be made for him, one which will give him a certain amount of position and will carry with it good money. Although I am not acting directly on my father's instructions," the girl said earnestly, "I know that in making such an arrangement as this I am doing what he would have done. It will not be necessary, of course, to take everyone into my confidence," Christine added, the colour coming and going in her cheeks as she spoke, "but to you, Mr. Millward, I am speaking as freely as I may. Mr. Dancroft had a great claim on my father—a claim which dates back a great many years, and had, indeed, originally connection with his father. Circumstances arose to put this young man in a wrong position. In memory of my dearest father and to uphold his honour, Mr. Millward, it is necessary that I should do everything in my power to give back to Mr. Dancroft some of that which he should have had all these years, and I can conceive no better plan than to let him share in the responsibility of the work done by the firm. In other words, to let him earn the income which I desire, he shall have."

Mr. Millward, a middle-aged man, sat with contracted brows listening. He seemed to be pon-

dering what Christine was saying. Suddenly he looked up, and his brow cleared.

"The name seemed familiar to me," he explained. "I was wondering where I had heard it, and now I remember. It must be about three or four years ago that your father spoke to me about some people of the name of Dancroft. He seemed to be a bit worried about them. They came from the north, originally, I believe, and Mr. Fielding was very anxious to find them."

Christine caught her breath with a sound like a sob. Those words, vague and unsatisfactory as they might be to others, constituted to her a veritable defence. They took away from the memory of Henry Fielding the reproach which had been so terrible to her to listen to, that reproach that he had never attempted to come in touch with those belonging to the man whom he had wronged.

"It must have been this very young man and his family whom my father was anxious to find," she said as calmly as she could speak. "I want you to write to Mr. Dancroft and ask him to call and see you. You will find him very rough, but he seems to me strong and capable, a man who might do big things if he were in the right groove. Whether he is clever or not is, however, outside any question. He must be helped, and we must do this at once. I have put my wishes before you, and I shall rely on having them carried out. This is hardly so much a matter of business," the girl added earnestly, "as justice."

She felt a great sense of relief after Mr. Mill-

ward had gone; indeed, she was conscious of something akin to pleasure when she let herself picture the difference that would be now worked in James Dancroft's life.

In the afternoon she went for a long ramble by herself through the woods and fields. On her return she found that several people had called, and this brought her back uncomfortably to the realization that the eyes of the county were upon her, and that there would be much gossip and comment and exclamation over the arrival of such strange guests as Mrs. Dancroft and her daughter at Hunston Manor.

When she had come away from that most unpleasant interview with Mrs. Dancroft, she had passed down the hotel stairs like one stunned. The bitterness, the venom, the unconcealed hatred of the old woman, were elements with which she had never yet had to contend. Their effect upon Christine was pitiful.

James Dancroft had followed her out of the room, and as she paused a moment before leaving the hotel, he had spoken to her, asking her if he could not get her a cab.

Christine had accepted his offer. They had stood in silence whilst the cab was called, but just as she was about to drive away Christine had called the young man to her.

"I have no right and I cannot exact this," she said in a voice that was broken and trembling; "but oh! I do beseech you if you have the power, spare me the one great misery of having this made public. I—I thought I should be strong enough

to protect him, but I see now that I may do everything in my power and yet I may fail if—if you do not show some mercy."

He did not answer her immediately. He had looked at her, and then he was looking away, in his curt way he had said:

"You seem to be making one great mistake. It is true that we—my mother could blacken your father's memory if she chose to; she could also raise up a great scandal, but do you realize that she could not get a farthing out of you unless you chose to give it? The truth is that we've no real hold on you, you know. You had best grasp that fact," the man said doggedly, "before you go a step further. However much we may abuse you, we cannot really hurt you unless you choose to let us do so."

And Christine had answered him passionately:

"Do you think that money counts? I would have gladly given you every penny I have if only you could have left me those things which have been so beautiful to me!"

He had bitten his lip, and his dark eyes had grown soft; then he had said abruptly:

"I don't know that I can do much, but all I can do I will. I was ready and keen enough to fight your father; that was man to man. But I am not the sort to make war with a woman; and perhaps if I had realized what I realize now I should have acted differently."

They had said no more, he had stepped back, and the cab had rolled away, carrying Christine to the City; but more than once in her lonely

walk this day she had remembered his words, and she had felt a shred of comfort in the knowledge that, though he could be so rough and even savage in manner, he was not wholly without feeling.

Indeed, she found herself unconsciously building upon him as a kind of ally where his mother was concerned. His blunt assertion of the fact that they could not legally force her to do a thing for them, was not merely a proof of his straightforwardness, but it gave her an insight into what was really passing in the minds of those belonging to him. 'If it was the money that the old woman and her daughter wanted, might it not be possible to give them all they asked for, and so exact silence? For, after all, to attack the memory of Henry Fielding without obtaining those substantial advantages which now awaited them would doubtless afford them very little satisfaction. Here, at least, was material to make some comfort. Christine, in truth, hardly gathered as yet how James Dancroft's frankness had helped her in this dark hour, or how much reliance she put in his promise to stand between his mother's spiteful enmity and herself.

* * * * * *

Sir George was making a call when Christine's letter putting an end to their engagement was delivered. He had pondered the question of Miss Knox very carefully, and he had decided that he would go and see her. He had no intention of allowing himself to be treated in a cavalier manner by Constance. Moreover, he was a trifle curious

to know more about her, and in his present mood he felt that there might be some little satisfaction to be derived from coming in close contact with this woman whom he convinced himself was merely playing a part with him.

He had prepared himself, of course, for some little change in Miss Knox, nevertheless, her appearance took him by surprise.

She was exquisitely dressed, and looked remarkably handsome. Several people were with her when he arrived, among them a tall, elderly man, whom she introduced to Sir George as her uncle.

"We are, however, more than uncle and niece," she said, "for I have been adopted as a daughter."

Sir George was an adept at small talk, and when he liked could make himself very agreeable.

He waited till the other people had gone before he indulged in sentiment; then when he found himself alone his tone changed.

"So you are rich and happy, and your life is going to be a fairy story. And you take the first advantage of this happiness to write me a perfectly odious letter."

He said all this lightly enough, but he was watching Miss Knox carefully. He saw that she changed colour, although she was evidently determined to carry the matter off lightly, and, in particular, to impress him with her indifference.

"I don't think it was odious," she answered. "It was a very ordinary little note."

"Was it? I don't quite agree with you, and I don't mind confessing that it upset me a good deal to have such a letter from you."

Constance Knox bit her lip, and her face was crimson for an instant; then with a touch of bravado in her manner, she said:

"Oh! I daresay it surprised you. When a woman has been a fool she must always be a fool, I suppose."

"I wonder why you call yourself by such harsh words?" the man said.

But she only shrugged her shoulders and nervously began to speak of his mother. His manner surprised and disturbed her.

"Lady Ellen was so good, she let me come away at once, although I am afraid she must miss me."

"About that there can be no doubt," said Sir George; "still," it was his turn to shrug his shoulders now, "when fairy stories happen, ordinary people must be put on one side." He changed his note suddenly. "I really came not to say this kind of thing," he said, "but to tell you how awfully glad I am to know of your good fortune. I always felt that you were a princess wandering outside your proper sphere, and though, of course, we shall lose you and your friendship, I am still sincere enough when I say that I am glad that you are going to have so much happiness."

Constance Knox rose and moved away from him. She did not want him to see that there were tears in her eyes. She had been coaching herself for this possible interview, and she had resolved to be so strong and so proud; but he disarmed her. He gave her the impression (why she could hardly explain) that he was not happy himself, and the mere suggestion of this brought home to her the cer-

tainty that indifference, where this man was concerned, would never be possible to her. The return of her uncle at this moment prevented any further intimate conversation.

All Sir George could do was to press the hand Constance gave him, and to hold it a little longer than was absolutely necessary, and as he walked away from the hotel he was well pleased with himself. For he had felt the tremor which had run through her whole being as their hands had clasped, and he knew that with this woman love had been no transient thing, and that if he chose he could force such a confession from her lips. He had had so much to vex him, so much to sting and fret his vanity of late, that this little episode had a much greater significance than it would have had in ordinary circumstances.

It was in this mood of restored self-complacency that he returned later in the afternoon to his mother's house and found Christine's letter. Although prepared for some further vexation in connection with the girl, and his plans for the future, the man was wholly unprepared to have the engagement broken, and Christine's letter conveying her wishes in this respect came in the nature of a blow. He was, of course, horribly, bitterly vexed, but the matter touched him too keenly for anger. As he realized the enormous and unpleasant difference this would make to his future, Narborough caught his breath. There were so many, many things to be considered.

On the instant he determined that by every means in his power he must prevent this separation.

"This is all Peggy's fault!" he said once between his teeth. "If I had had my way, Christine would never have drifted out of my hand; she did care for me! She is not the sort of girl to have listened to me as she did that night if she had not cared. And if she was fond of me then, why should she not——" He stopped abruptly in his thoughts as a sudden suggestion came to him. "Unless there is another man!" But almost immediately he dismissed this idea; the only rival he had to fear was this morbid, wholly ridiculous, hysterical sentiment about her father.

He paced the room, thinking and planning; not without a gigantic struggle would he be deposed from the sovereignty which Christine Fielding's money would give him, and the sweets of which he had already commenced to taste.

"I must humour her in a sense; opposition would be fatal."

The result of his careful and anxious thought was that he sat down finally and wrote a few kind words tinged with just the right note of sadness:

"My happiness is to minister to your wish even at the sacrifice of all that is most dear to me," he wrote; "but I cannot accept to be sent out of your life or to lose all I hold precious so suddenly. I must see you. I will run down to Hunston at the end of this week. I feel you need me. Am I right? At any rate, believe always you have in me a devoted friend and a lover."

This letter despatched, Sir George felt easier

in his mind. He even went so far as to make plans for an immediate and very quiet marriage.

"After which," he said to himself with a cold smile, as he dressed for the evening, "she may weep as much and as often on her father's grave as she wants to!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE morning of the day on which the Dancrofts were to arrive there was a sense of excitement and an unusual movement prevailing at Hunston Manor.

Christine had made all possible arrangements for the comfort of those who were coming; but Mrs. Dancroft was quickly demonstrating that no matter what was being done for her benefit nothing would be right except that which she commanded herself.

Three telegrams were received in the course of the morning changing the hour of her arrival, and when finally she fixed on a train it was her decree that both a carriage and a motor-car should be in waiting at the station.

Immediately after her father's death Christine had given orders that his bedroom should be closed. She had resolved that no one should ever use it whilst she at least was there to prevent this. It was by no means the largest room in the house, and it was very simply furnished.

In going through the house with her housekeeper Christine had chosen the most important of the guest-chambers for Mrs. Dancroft's use.

The window commanded a most magnificent view over the country, the room was most beautifully furnished; it had a boudoir attached, and was in every sense of the word a delightful and luxurious apartment.

Miss Dancroft would be close to her mother in another beautiful room. But somehow, as Christine Fielding paced to and fro in the hall waiting for her strange visitors to arrive, she felt wearily and nervously that she must be prepared to have all her plans upset.

And sure enough, Mrs. Dancroft had scarcely alighted from the carriage and, supported on her son's arm, had barely entered the hall, before she began to show of what metal she was made.

Perhaps in the long ago, in those days upon which James Dancroft had dwelt with so much pathos when speaking of the past to Christine, there had been something soft and gentle in this woman's nature, but now there seemed to be nothing but bitterness, cruelty, and relentless hate.

Christine had advanced with her hand extended, but the old woman put her on one side. She stood and looked about her trembling with excitement and with exultation. She leaned on a stick and slipped her arm away from her son's supporting hold.

"So—so——" she said, "this was one of his houses! Only one of them! Very fine! Very fine indeed—quite a palace. Oh, yes, the best wasn't too good for our dear Henry Fielding! One sees that at a glance!"

Her daughter, who had followed in the motor-car, and now entered, gave an impatient sigh and shrugged her shoulders.

"I should like to go to my room," she said to Christine.

Though she spoke without her mother's bitterness, she yet managed to put a great deal that was disagreeable into the tone of her voice.

It was her brother who answered her.

"You can wait a minute or two, I suppose," he said sharply.

He had winced as he had seen his mother push aside Christine's outstretched hand. Just for an instant he had felt impelled to stretch out his own; but the girl had drawn back instantly with a shiver, and biting his lip savagely he drew back also.

There was something witch-like about Mrs. Dancroft as she stood in her black shabby clothes leaning heavily on the stick and darting her piercing eyes from side to side. She muttered to herself frequently as she took the first survey of what was to be her home, then suddenly she stood erect and pointed with her stick at the portrait of Henry Fielding over the mantelpiece.

"James," she said, "you will see that that thing is taken away. Do you suppose that I am going to live looking up at that vile face every day of my life?"

And Dancroft answered the old woman almost roughly.

"Come," he said, "that is enough; you are tired, you had better go upstairs." Then he addressed Christine for the first time. "Will you let

a servant come and show my mother to her room ? " he said. " My sister Anne can go with her."

Christine was trembling in every limb and was as white as a ghost.

" I—I will take Mrs. Dancroft and your sister upstairs myself," she said, and turning, she made to go up the stairs.

Anne Dancroft at once moved forward to follow her, but the old woman still stood where she was.

" That picture has got to go," she said doggedly. " There'll be some one in this big grand house, I suppose, that can take it down. I want to see it done now, at once."

But her son answered her again in that harsh manner.

" There is a time for everything, mother," he said ; " you can't begin by upsetting the house the moment you come into it. Come, you are not good at walking upstairs, I'll help you."

The progress up the stairs was a tedious one. From the first landing Christine paused and watched Mrs. Dancroft's painfully slow ascent. She led the way herself to the rooms she had chosen for the new-comers.

Although she did not express it in open words it was evident that Anne Dancroft found her surroundings more charming even than she had imagined.

The room she was to occupy was one which Mrs. Dudworth had generally used when she was at Hunston, and the girl's eyes gleamed with satisfaction as she passed into this room and glanced about her. She was keen enough to appreciate the

extraordinary change in their fortunes, for she had grown heartily sick of poverty, although she had been too young to realize the misery of her father's death. She even condescended to thank Christine for escorting her upstairs, but she did it awkwardly, for truth to tell she was not quite at her ease with Miss Fielding.

"Thanks. I can get along all right now," she said; and then, as Christine was passing quickly out of the room, she added: "I suppose there's some one to wait on me. I didn't have time to get a maid in town."

Christine reassured her on this point, and as she went out leaving Miss Dancroft alone, she closed the door, and, pausing a moment, put her hand to her head.

The nervous tension was horrible, the feeling which these people had brought into her home, hitherto so beautiful in its tranquillity and its tender memories, frightened her. She felt at this moment as if she could not possibly endure all which faced her now.

One of the maids came in search of her. It appeared that Mrs. Dancroft, having finally reached the room set apart for her, had, of course, refused to occupy it until at least she had seen every other room. Consequently a procession was made all over the house and every room shown, even Christine's own, which had really been the girl's apartment ever since she had been a baby and was perhaps the most modest in the house.

James Dancroft had gone downstairs to the hall again. He felt angry, but he felt also miserable

with a new kind of misery, a sense of remorse, something more heart-reaching than any which he had experienced before. His mother's vindictiveness seemed almost contemptible to him in this moment. As he had once said to Christine, to fight with her father was one thing, to wage war upon a girl quite another. And his mother's studied cruelty and insolence was peculiarly hard for the man to suffer unprotestingly. Yet to prevent this was beyond him now.

During the slow progress from room to room the old woman grunted from time to time, saying nothing, however; but when she went back again to the rooms which had been prepared for her, she said:

"I want to sleep where he slept. I want to have the things that were his."

And Christine looked her in the eyes just for an instant, and answered coldly, even hardly:

"I am sorry, but my father's room is closed—closed by my orders, and no one shall occupy that room—no one!"

Then her composure gave way at last, and turning, she went quickly out of the room.

There was on the landing above an old window-corner, where as a child she had been wont to play, and there she went now and flung herself face downwards on the cushions, not to weep, for she suffered too much for the relief of tears, but just to pause awhile, to gather together her strength, to call up all her courage. She stayed there a long while; then she rose and went down the stairs.

The hall was empty. Just for a moment she could almost pretend to herself that all that which had just passed had been a dream, a horrible dream.

Casson came to find her as she stood there, and he brought her some letters.

"Will dinner be at the usual hour, Miss Christine?" he asked.

And Miss Fielding replied that she was not quite sure. But added: "I will let you know as soon as I have spoken to Mrs. Dancroft. She may perhaps wish to dine in her own room."

When she was alone Christine glanced at her letters. There was one from Margaret Dudworth, several from acquaintances, and one from Narborough. She paused a moment before opening this latter, and then did so hurriedly.

Sir George would have been well content if he could have seen the effect which his letter produced.

The tears which had refused to flow just a little while before came now.

If he had written angrily it would have been different; but his studied simplicity and pathetic desire to please seemed to ring so true that the words, "I feel you need me," went straight to her heart.

Indeed and indeed she did need him, or someone like him; someone who would be gentle and helpful and tender with her! She had feared at first the advent of his answer to her letter, but now that it had come it was very sweet to her. His quiet refusal to be put aside seemed to Christine eloquent of the love he had so often professed.

In this moment she felt herself clinging to him almost with a sense of desperation. She told herself she had been mad to try and cut herself adrift from him, to send him from her and to stand quite alone. She resolved to see Sir George, and though she could never tell him all, she would let him understand that she prized the devotion he offered beyond all description. Further than that, Christine did not go even in her thoughts, for the future stretched before her so doubtfully, so darkly.

Margaret Dudworth's letter she put aside to read later that night; it would be a consolation, and she would need consolation most surely.

She was resting back on the couch with her eyes closed when James Dancroft came down the stairs slowly. His brows contracted as he looked at her, and noticed with what an effort she rose.

"I have persuaded my mother," he said, abruptly, "to remain in the room which you have given her. There is a woman who has been accustomed to live with her, and who knows her ways, this woman will arrive to-night. She would have come with us, but she had to travel down from the north. I think," he said curtly, "that the coming of this woman will relieve you of a certain amount of bother. My mother is not used to grand servants and their ways."

Christine stood by the fire. Spring as it was the winds were cold and the warmth of the fire was very pleasant. She said nothing, but he saw that she was stronger, and he felt that though she might still need all his pity she would rather

suffer threefold what she had to suffer than realize that this pity was offered to her.

Something in her attitude roused his resentment. She was such a slim thing, so young, yet as she stood there coldly she seemed to have a strength which he himself might have envied. She seemed too, to be so far apart from him, so consciously his superior. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "I'm off. I daresay it will be hard work at first, but perhaps they will shake down sooner than one might expect."

Then Christine roused herself.

"You are going?" she said. "You are not going to stay here?" There was open dismay in her intonation.

"Stay! I stay here? It is all very well for my mother: she is an old woman; and for my sister: she is a girl. What I've done I've done for them, please understand that, not for myself."

He moved towards the entrance door, and Christine followed him.

"Mr. Dancroft," she said, "I want to speak to you."

"Well?" he turned.

"I wish to ask you if you had a letter from my—my father's—from the firm?"

He said "Yes," and an instant later added: "But I have nothing to do with these people; I've got my own business, and I'm not quite ready, you see, to take charity."

The way he said this word brought the colour rushing to Christine's tired, pale face.

"I think you are very, very hard to deal with," she answered; "there is no question of charity. *The way is open to you to work, to share late in the day perhaps, but still to share.*"

"Work!" he laughed sneeringly. "No office drudgery for me, thank you. I'll choose my own life, my own profession. When I want help I'll let you know."

"Oh!" said Christine, and the word escaped her almost like a cry, "how terrible all this is—how terrible!"

She walked back to the fire, and he stood and looked at her steadily; then he spoke, and there was a curious inflection in his voice:

"I told you the other night when I came here you ought to have someone to work with you in this. It isn't fair on you. It's too much for you——"

Christine swept round and faced him, the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Everything could be made fair, Mr. Dancroft," she said, "everything—even the most sorrowful part—could be made to seem less terrible if—if only all of you would meet me half way."

He frowned for an instant, then he smiled a rather disagreeable smile.

"You are dealing with savages, you must remember," he said. "We have had none of the refining and beautifying influences which have surrounded you ever since you can remember. As I told you the other day, you are not obliged to do what you are doing; but if you choose to keep up the hypocrisy of your father's good

name, well you'll have to pay a big price, that's all!"

He was gone before Christine could say anything more, even if she had wished to speak.

As a matter of fact his last speech, given so roughly and so rudely, took away from her instantly that feeling of reliance, even of sympathy, with which he had inspired her when she had last seen him in London.

His ever ready sneer for her father's memory carried a full measure of hurtful bitterness.

"So," she said to herself, "I have to meet this and cope with it single-handed. I thought perhaps he would have helped me, but I ought to have known better. He is every bit as cruel, as horrible, and as merciless as his mother!"

Her hand closed over George Narborough's letter, and once again there ran through her a natural thrill as she let herself grasp the truth that here was one who loved her, and who would protect her because of that love, if only she could bring herself to ask for that protection.

She went to find her housekeeper and prepare for the coming of the woman who was to wait on Mrs. Dancroft. In a sense she was relieved that there should be someone in close attendance on this terrible old woman. At the same time Christine prepared herself for the advent of yet another enemy.

Before going to her room to dress for dinner she sought Anne Dancroft, desiring to know from the girl what her mother would wish to do that evening.

Anne was in the midst of having her boxes unpacked. She had found time to spend a fair amount of the money which Christine had provided, and all sorts of finery were heaped about her. Like Mrs. Coniston, she was inclined to regard Christine's very simple attire with a certain amount of scorn. Certainly there was nothing about Miss Fielding's black garments to suggest that she possessed such vast wealth, and Miss Dancroft had been quick to notice that Christine did not wear a single jewel.

She was shrewd again, however, to realize that, though she herself was handsome in a way, there was a charm and an attraction about Christine Fielding which she would probably never possess.

This annoyed the young woman, and served to keep alive the sentiment of dislike which, according to her mother, was the proper feeling she should entertain for Henry Fielding's daughter. The truth being that though she was selfish and perhaps a little grasping, and the illusions of youth had been knocked out of her long ago, Anne Dancroft was not really bad-natured. She professed ignorance now as to what her mother would wish to do, but condescended, after a while, to go and find out.

When she came back with the information that Mrs. Dancroft was tired, and would remain in her room, Christine gave a great sigh of relief. She was destined, however, to have no lengthened spell of rest. As she and Anne sat at dinner later on, Miss Dancroft very smartly arrayed and cautiously watching Christine at every turn to

see how she manipulated the difficulties of various dishes, a message was sent down to say that Mrs. Dancroft wanted to speak to Miss Fielding after dinner.

"You had better go and get it over," Miss Dancroft said briskly. "Mother's a rare one for keeping on, and if you didn't go to her she'd as like as not come down and make a scene in front of the servants."

Christine's face had flushed and now was very pale. She said nothing, however. Eating with her was a pretence, but Anne enjoyed her dinner thoroughly, that is to say, she would have enjoyed it if Casson and the two footmen had not been in the room. She managed very well all things considered except when she upset a glass of claret; and she grew talkative when by and by the servants withdrew and she and Christine were alone.

It was evident she had no intention of spending her life in a quiet countrified fashion, evident, too, that she expected Miss Fielding to launch her into such society as there was round and about Hunston Manor. Though she was common and her speech every now and then made Christine wince, there was something human and natural about the girl; and unconsciously Christine found herself turning to the thought of making a friend of Anne and so helping the situation.

The fact alone that Miss Dancroft never spoke Henry Fielding's name argued that she was free to a great extent from the resentful animus which ran like poison through the veins of her mother and brother.

Whilst she was still chattering a second message came to her from Mrs. Dancroft: "Miss Fielding was to go to her at once."

Casson gave the message with all his usual deference. It hurt the servant to see the hurried way in which his young mistress rose from her seat.

The maid who had brought him the message from Mrs. Dancroft had exclaimed at the strange nature of the old lady.

"Seems queer-like in her head, that she do," this girl said to Casson, "sending for Miss Fielding just as if she was a bit of a schoolgirl. They're a funny lot, that's what I think they are. What do you think, Mr. Casson?"

Casson had rebuked the maid, but in his heart he had agreed with her.

They were a funny lot! There was something about the coming of these people which he did not like, something which boded good for no one in Hunston. A day or so before he had congratulated himself when Sir George Narborough had gone away in such a bad temper that Miss Christine's marriage appeared to be a matter for the remote future; but he told himself now that he would infinitely prefer a man like Sir George to rule at Hunston, hard master as he surely would be, than suffer the present arrangement for any long period.

CHAPTER XV

THREE or four days later Sir George went down again to Hunston Manor. His complacency was entirely restored. He had received several letters from Christine, in all of which the girl let him realize that she would work in with his will. The man had hardly expected so much submission.

He had only seen Mrs. Dudworth once. She had been summoned to Ireland urgently, called thence by her husband's sister, a woman to whom she was dearly attached and who was seriously ill. It was a great regret to Margaret Dudworth that she could not be with Christine at this time.

"You know," she said to Sir George, "she is not alone at Hunston. There are some people with her now. I cannot quite make out whether they are connections of her father's or not, but evidently they have some claim on Christine, and I think this is the business about which she wrote to you."

It was not a pleasing matter to Sir George to be told that any connections of Henry Fielding had cropped up, for despite the great advantages of his marriage with Christine, he never lost sight of the fact that her father's beginning had been

humble and mysterious, and his real status a most disagreeably inferior one.

"If poor relations are going to worry her," he said, "there is the more reason that someone should take care of her."

And in this sentiment Mrs. Dudworth entirely agreed. Nevertheless, she felt anxious, for though Christine had told her nothing of the truth, she felt intuitively that some great trouble had come into the girl's life, brought in all probability by these people who were now staying with her.

"As soon as I can leave Ireland," she said to Narborough, "I shall go down to Hunston myself. I don't think Christine would be willingly imposed upon, but her attachment to her father was so extraordinary that it would open the way for unscrupulous people to trade upon such an unusual and devoted love."

"She is a child," Narborough said, as he had said once before, "and money or no money, she requires care, and I mean to look after her, Peggy!"

Christine had intended to meet Sir George at the station in the car herself; but already she had been taught a lesson; her movements now were not her own to command.

Mrs. Dancroft had expressed a wish to drive that afternoon, and further had ordered Miss Fielding to accompany her. Therefore, when Sir George reached Hunston he found only Anne Dancroft, whose air of being absolutely at home surprised him disagreeably. Neither was he attracted by Miss Dancroft's appearance. He found her appallingly common and her speech positively hurt him.

He did not waste much attention on her however, but paced to and fro in the hall, waiting for Christine to return. Her absence roused all his old impatient annoyance. Surely when she knew he was coming she should have been there to receive him!

When the carriage finally arrived it contained only Mrs. Dancroft; and it was the footman who gave Sir George the message hurriedly, that Miss Fielding had got out at the gate as she preferred to walk through the grounds.

Sir George was in a mood ripe for anger when he set forth to go and meet Christine, but as he saw her coming towards him his feelings were abruptly changed. To say that he was surprised by the difference in the girl would be to describe his feelings inadequately. Her appearance gave him a shock.

Christine walked as though she were weary in every limb. Her face in the broad black hat she wore looked thin and colourless. She advanced some time without seeing him, then all at once she caught sight of him, and in that instant the man was well repaid for all the discomfort and vexation he had experienced. There was no mistaking the significance of the light which flashed into Christine's eyes or the colour which rushed into her cheeks. It was over again such a moment of submission of response as had come when he had spoken of his love that bygone night on the river and had asked her to be his wife.

She stretched out both her hands in involuntary fashion to him, and he, moved at once by the

simple pathos of the action, drew her close to him and murmuring her name tenderly, stooped and kissed her.

And it was at this very moment that James Dancroft, whose visit was unexpected as far as Christine was concerned, coming along from the village in a swinging fashion, turned a corner and saw them together. Just for an instant Dancroft paused and his face wore a curious expression; the next he went on his way, and strode past, neither looking at them or vouchsafing any greeting to Miss Fielding.

The sound of advancing steps had roused Christine from a brief spell of consoling sympathy amounting even to happiness, and as she looked round sharply and saw Dancroft, her face was hot with colour, and her heart hot with shame.

It was not a sense of humiliation from modesty alone which held her, it was the sweeping back of that intolerable shame which sight of this other man signified. For the coming of James Dancroft at such a moment carried, indeed, a weighty significance; it recalled her from what might have been to what really was.

It confronted her suddenly with a new and a harder duty, the task of holding the happiness which seemed to her only possible through George Narborough's love, and still remaining protector of the secret of her father's past!

CHAPTER XVI

AND as was inevitable, Sir George began almost immediately to question, and to question closely.

The appearance of Dancroft, whom he had quickly recognized, had brought back with a rush the resentful remembrance that he was as yet outside the knowledge of what was really passing in the girl's life at this time. Christine just at first pleaded to him.

"I want to forget lots of things," she had said almost passionately. "I want you to help me to forget them."

And Sir George answered this appeal by taking her hand and caressing it.

"You must always turn to me," he said; "if there is anything to bother you, you must bring it to me, Christine. I knew that you were being worried in some way or another; that is why I came down, and why I wanted to be with you. Now, my dearest, you are going to tell me everything in a little while."

At Christine's wish they sauntered about the grounds. She had a horror of taking him indoors, of putting him in close contact with the

people who lived there now. For a few moments Sir George humoured her.

They talked of Peggy and of Roger and his doings at Eton; they spoke of his mother; he gave her a *compte rendu* of his own life since they had last met; but she felt only too surely that he was quivering with curiosity and even excitement, and at last this could be contained no longer. Suddenly, abruptly, he put a question to her:

"That man who came up the path just now, who is he? what is he doing here?"

Christine went white to the lips as she answered:

"He has come to see his mother and his sister; they are staying with me."

Sir George frowned sharply:

"But——" he began, he was going to say, "but this fellow is common; he looks like a tramp, a labouring man," and though he checked himself, and these words were not spoken, his sentiment was expressed only too eloquently in his silence. Christine answered these unspoken words after a slight pause.

"I daresay you will find it strange that these people are here," she said in a low voice; "but they have a right to be here, George; they—they belong to my father's early life."

"Yes," said Sir George, "I gathered something of this sort from Peggy; but what relations are they?"

Christine paused a little while, and then said:

"They are no relations at all."

"No relations!" echoed Sir George; "but——"

And the girl broke in hurriedly:

"*Oh! I know it must seem strange to you, and there is a good deal that I cannot explain to* you, George; but, believe me, they have a right to be here."

"Possibly," the man answered, after a little pause; "but they have no right to make you *look* as you are looking now, no right to dominate your life. I have only just seen them, but a glance is enough to tell me the class of people they are. My dear little girl, do you realize that you are surrounded by crowds and throngs of people who will be only too ready to pretend that they have a claim upon you? This is the fate of everyone who has a great deal of money. I am not saying a word against your being charitable. I know what your nature is; you would like to give to all the world, but there are limits, Christine dearest, there are limits."

They had reached a part of the park where there was a seat. Christine sat down and bit her lip. She had hoped to have evaded this conversation, at least for a time, but she saw how futile this hope was; how inevitable, how more than natural it was that George Narborough would want some explanation of the Dancrofts' presence at Hunston Manor. She answered him wearily:

"I know that what you say is very true," she said; "but strange as it may seem to you, I am not being imposed upon. As I told you just now, I must repeat, these people have a right to be here, a right to share in all I have."

"I think," Narborough said, and he did not speak immediately, "I think, dearest, this is a matter

which should be handled by someone else. If you do not wish me to take it up, although as your future husband undoubtedly I am the proper person to handle all these kind of cases, why then let someone else act in my place—your lawyers, or that man in the City, your father's confidential clerk and manager. He seems a shrewd man. I understood before you went away that you were passing all the charity cases through the hands of the firm, and that it was one person's duty practically to attend to these things."

Christine caught her breath sharply.

"Yes, but this is not an ordinary case of charity. Indeed, it is not. These people have a claim—a claim which I cannot put aside." Then she turned to the man and stretched out her hands again. "Oh! don't let us talk about it," she said, with a break in her voice. "I want to be happy when I am with you."

Sir George took her hands and kissed them, and then he kissed her again. Nothing would have been more satisfactory to him than this breakdown of the girl's spirit, if the circumstances surrounding her had been unchanged; but there came upon him the unpleasant feeling that he really was in a very little better position with Christine than he had been during the last few months. That is to say, that despite their engagement, he really stood outside her intimate life, and was still a long way off from being master of her and of ordering her ways.

He ceased abruptly, however, to ask questions; instead, he exerted himself to soothe her agitation,

to make himself, if possible, a real comfort and a real necessity to her, and he succeeded amazingly well; so much so, that when he spoke of returning to town, Christine found herself almost pleading with him not to go.

A little later, however, she saw that he was wise to go, and they walked together to the stable yard to order a carriage to take him to the station.

Narborough's pleasant mood, however, vanished entirely when he was alone. He was not only annoyed, and that sharply, but he was alarmed, and the next day he made a point of going down to the City to interview Mr. Millward.

The information which he derived there was not calculated to soothe away his uneasiness; on the contrary.

He questioned sharply in every direction, and soon satisfied himself that Miss Fielding's assertion that these people had a claim upon her was no imagination on the girl's part.

Mr. Millward informed Sir George that he could give him no definite facts to go upon; nevertheless, he told the young man what he had not told Christine, that he was aware that Mr. Fielding had been harassed for some time before his death about some matter connected with people of the name of Dancroft; and he repeated his assertion that he knew that the dead man had taken a great deal of trouble to try and trace these people.

Sir George eased his mind by writing a long account to Mrs. Dudworth of his visit to Hunston.

"I hope you will be able to go to Christine as soon as you possibly can," he wrote. "Judge of

my amazement and my vexation when I found that she had installed in the house a whole family! A set of the most objectionable people imaginable, who are parading the whole place as if they are masters and mistresses of all she possesses. They are common people; the man, indeed, looks like a mechanic, or perhaps something not quite so respectable. Christine declares they have a right to be at Hunston, but this seems to me preposterous. As I said to her very plainly: 'All rich people are a target for schemers and adventurers.' I feel really unhappy about the matter."

To this letter Mrs. Dudworth sent a telegram, announcing that she would leave Ireland at the end of the week, and that she would go direct to Hunston Manor on her return.

She wrote at the same time to Christine, giving the same information. And when Christine received that letter, it seemed as if the sun had suddenly shone where before all was cold and dark. Immediately she began to count the hours till Peggy could be with her; for when Sir George had left her he had taken away with him very completely the comfort and the pleasure which sight of him had brought.

Indeed, he left her more heavily burdened than before. The knowledge that she must, if she kept George Narborough in her life, share with him the story which Dancroft had brought to her, that she must go through the anguish of setting forth her father's treachery and wrong-doing, and buy her future happiness at the cost of humiliating her father's memory, was too terrible.

Though she did not as yet grasp the real smallness and poverty of Narborough's nature, she knew enough to fear his judgment, to convince herself that he would deal very harshly with that old story. It was wrong of her (so she told herself now) not to have seen how impossible it was for the engagement between Sir George and herself to continue; she should have been strong, she should have thrust from her path the temptation which remembrance of the affection he professed for her had brought. As it was, her position was infinitely more difficult. Indeed, the coming of Sir George was the cue for a fresh outburst on the part of Mrs. Dancroft.

After his departure, the girl had made her way quietly to her own room. She wished to avoid meeting James Dancroft, and in this she succeeded, for he apparently only remained an hour or so, and departed, as he had come, on foot.

This humble method of coming and going did however, commend itself to his mother. She chose to lay the blame on Miss Fielding, although her son was doing everything in his power to show, as he had frankly stated, that he wanted to have no personal share in the luxury with which his mother and his sister were now surrounded.

Christine was resting in a chair in her own room when Mrs. Dancroft's attendant knocked at the door.

This woman, by name Bessie, was, if possible, more objectionable to Miss Fielding than her mistress. She bore a marked resemblance to Mrs. Dancroft, and could have been only a few years younger; but where the other woman was crippled

and bent, this woman was straight and agile. She looked as if she could be very strong.

Anne Dancroft heartily disliked Bessie, and this constituted perhaps a very real touch of sympathy between Christine and the younger of her guests.

Bessie's manner was a reflection of her mistress's. She took little trouble to be civil to any one, least of all to Miss Fielding.

"You're wanted," she said now as curtly as possible.

Christine's maid happened to be in the room, and came forward hurriedly.

War had been already declared between herself and Bessie. "Miss Fielding is tired and is resting," said Barker.

And Bessie's reply was to the point:

"I'm not speaking to you."

Christine got out of the chair and her maid moved towards her involuntarily, protest in her eyes and unspoken on her lips.

The girl flushed. It was so strange, so new to her to feel humiliated.

"Tell Mrs. Dancroft," she said, "that I will come in a little while. I am changing my dress now, and I have some letters to write."

"You'd best come soon," said Bessie, laconically, as she turned away.

Barker did not look at her mistress as she closed the door; she hurried about arranging the room, and putting out the simple gown which Christine would wear for dinner; but the knowledge that her maid was quivering with indignation, smarting with surprise, reached Christine all the same.

She did not speak at once, but after a little while, as Barker was fastening her gown, she said gently:

"Try not to quarrel with Bessie, she is old and rough; she doesn't know any better."

The maid did not answer at once, for tears were rolling down her cheeks. As she brushed these away, she said:

"Do you think I mind for myself? *I* don't care what she says; it's the way she speaks to you, Miss Christine, that gets my temper up. It's fair maddening, that it is!"

Christine bit her lip, and after a little pause said:

"Yes, she is rude; but—but perhaps this will not last very long."

She gave expression to a hope which she knew had no existence, but which, nevertheless, refused to be put out of her heart. In a little while surely these people would get tired? She was convinced Mrs. Dancroft found no real pleasure or satisfaction in her present quarters, and Anne grumbled frankly and frequently at the dullness of the life at Hunston. Perhaps in a few weeks more they would accept the money she resolved upon offering to them and would go out of her home. "Far, far sooner would I be without a shilling and be free of them," Christine said to herself; "at least, my life would be my own then, and the horror of this old woman and her hatred would be spared me!"

She fastened the lace of her bodice with one of the few little brooches that she wore, and then went slowly to obey Mrs. Dancroft's command.

CHAPTER XVII

JAMES DANCROFT had paid a hurried visit to Hunston ostensibly to talk business with his mother, in reality to satisfy himself about Christine. He had been haunted by the recollection of the girl's patience and proud suffering, and he dreaded the effect of his mother's vigorous enmity on her. In the long ago he had been very fond of his mother, but a hundred things had served to separate him from his boyish devotion; what love he had for his parents was buried with his father. But he had been deeply sorry for his mother, and the knowledge of her wrongs had wakened in him a loyalty which had passed for love.

When he had been far away and news had reached him from time to time of her poverty, her tribulation, of the deaths of her children, she had assumed a pitiful aspect; and when he had seen her again and had looked upon her wasted face, and had seen the havoc which grief and want had inscribed there, he had felt every fibre in his being string itself together in one desperate effort to give back to her at least the material comfort of which she had been robbed. These things

apart, Dancroft, if he had confessed the truth to himself, would have realized that this bitter old woman possessed none of those qualities with which he had endowed his mother.

It was not, however, until he had come in contact with Christine Fielding and had been a witness to this younger woman's endurance, had grasped the significance of her wonderful love and had been forced to admiration by her determination to suffer no matter what, if only she could protect her beloved dead, that he really grasped how little there was in his mother to inspire him now with those tender sentiments which had flowed so readily from him when he had been a boy.

If he could have made matters lighter for Christine he would have done so, although his detestation for Henry Fielding, his indignation at the wrong done to his own father, burned as strongly as ever. As it was, he had felt constrained to let his mother make her own decision, and he had done nothing to urge her one way or the other when plans had been discussed, but on this occasion on his way down to Hunston Manor he had practically decided to use all his influence to cut short this present arrangement and to induce his mother to establish herself in a home of her own.

His thoughts indeed had been full of Christine Fielding as he had walked briskly from the station. But when he had come upon her so unexpectedly, when he had actually seen George Narborough, holding her in his arms and kissing her, all the anxiety, the sympathy, the eagerness which had filled his thoughts went from him, and instead

there came in their place resentful and even cruel feelings. The contrast between this other man and himself forced home unpleasantly facts which he had already commenced to realize with discomfort and a regret not wholly disconnected with vanity.

He had listened to all his mother had to say (and she had a whole budget of grievances) without a protesting word. When he left her and went to find his sister he said to himself with a shrug of his shoulders, "Why should I do anything to help her? She pretended to me that there was no one to whom she could turn; and though I was convinced that this fellow had some place in her life I did not think she would have lied till I saw them together. I shall do nothing for her! If she suffers through my mother's tongue, well—he will be ready to kiss away the pain, if she is tired she can go to his arms!"

His manner was so disagreeable that his sister lost her temper a little.

"It doesn't seem to me as if we'd done a very grand thing by coming here," she exclaimed, "the place is like a tomb. I tell you I simply hate it, Jim!"

And when her brother growled out:

"What did you expect?"

Anne answered with spirit:

"Expect? Why, something a little better than this! What's the use of having money if we don't do something to enjoy ourselves? This sort of life is enough to drive one silly, and it might be made a little bit better. There are all sorts of

people living round about us, but she pretends she doesn't know them. I suppose that means that she doesn't mean to know them now we are here."

"Why can't you be satisfied?" James Dancroft asked harshly. "A year ago you hardly knew how you were going to get bread, now you are living like a princess and you find it dull!"

"Yes, I do," said Anne sullenly. "A year ago was a year ago, now things are different." Then curiosity broke from her: "I say, Jim, did you know she was engaged? There was an awful swell fellow came down this afternoon; he went out to meet her. His name is Sir George Narborough. I made that stuck-up butler tell me all about it. He didn't want to say anything, but he had to answer when I asked him questions."

Dancroft frowned. Rough as he was, he had none of Anne's vulgarity, and she, for all her fine clothes, would never possess his dignity of spirit.

"You should have seen the way this Sir George looked at me," Anne went on. "I don't fancy he knew there was anybody staying here. My! he *is* a stuck-up chap and no mistake! They're well-suited, for she never comes off her high horse, though goodness knows she's got little enough to be proud about."

"That's enough!" Dancroft broke in roughly, and he turned so sharply on his sister that she quailed for an instant, but her temper came quickly to her aid again.

"Well, that's what mother is always saying," she declared, "so why shouldn't I say it?"

Her brother made no immediate answer; then he said:

"I'll tell you why, because you've got some common sense, or I think you have, and if you have common sense, Anne, you will understand that if Miss Fielding chose to change her attitude we should lose all this and you and mother would be back once again in cheap dingy lodgings. We have only a moral claim on this girl, remember. She has stood a good deal, and she can stand a good deal, but if we push her too far, well, she may turn round and show us the door!"

"I don't say anything to her, and I haven't got anything against her," the girl retorted. "As a matter of fact, I think all this is pretty rough on her, and if she'd give me half a chance we might get along together; but she goes about looking like a ghost, she doesn't eat, she won't talk. I don't care what you say, it is deadly dull for me!"

This was the end of their conversation, for James Dancroft announced his intention of going, and just for the sake of doing something Anne walked with him a little distance.

She noticed when her brother said "good-bye" and was walking away, that there was a change in his appearance. He still wore a soft felt hat, and his clothes were workmanlike, though they were new clothes, a fact which Anne regarded as hopeful.

"If he would only smarten himself up a bit," she said, "Jim would be an awfully good-looking fellow. He ought to wear gloves and take care

of his hands, and he ought to go to a good tailor."

She contrasted him in her mind with the figure of Sir George Narborough, and frowned a little.

"Couldn't expect him to look like that just for a while," she said, "yet I am not so sure that Jim isn't better-looking really."

The days were lengthening; it was a mild and pleasant afternoon, so Miss Dancroft strolled out of the grounds and into the village. She did not expect to see anyone interesting, but she had put on one of the smartest of her many new frocks, and it would be rather agreeable to note the admiration and envy in the eyes of the village girls and women who would look at her as she passed.

She was not in the house when Christine, having changed her dress, went down to Mrs. Dancroft's room; Anne made it a rule not to be present when her mother was being particularly disagreeable. The truth being that Anne had grown very tired of her mother's acrid temper, and was looking very confidently to make a future for herself out of her changed circumstances.

Mrs. Dancroft had summoned Miss Fielding to inform her that she resented the fact that her son should walk whilst Christine's friends should have a choice of carriages.

"There was a man here to-day," she said, "and you sent him back to the station in a motor-car. I'll have you know that this is not going to happen again. My son comes before all the other men you choose to have to the house."

It was the moment when Christine should have

spoken up bravely, but the truth must be told that the girl was growing terrified of this old woman. Whilst every part of her sensitive being was keenly awake to the humiliation which submission to Mrs. Dancroft's bitter will signified, the fear with which this old woman inspired her was so powerful it almost overwhelmed all other feelings.

Her spirit, it must be remembered, had been weakened by all she had gone through; she had been like a bird taken out of a warm comfortable nest and exposed to pitiless winds. The greater her fear, the stronger, however, grew that great purpose of her life, that determination to protect her father's memory. Even this very day a fresh proof had been forthcoming of the wonderful place the man had held in public estimation.

A year or so ago Mr. Fielding had given a large sum of money to various charities connected with the town which was close by. Through his help the old church and other buildings had been restored, and it was suggested now that a bust of Henry Fielding, or, at least, a monument of some sort, should be put up, inscribing his generosity and his benevolent interest in the place.

A letter from the most influential people in the town had just reached Christine in which she was asked to say in which form this tribute to her father's memory would please her best. She had that letter pressed close to her heart whilst she stood listening to Mrs. Dancroft's rude and bitter words.

How could she let the truth go forth? How

let these people who regarded the dead man with such affection and such honour, who regretted his death so sincerely, how could she let such as these hear the ugly story which this old woman had to tell? It was impossible! Silence and submission. These were the two duties she had to preach to herself—silence and submission. A silence which must shut out the thought of marriage and of the protection, the comfort, the relief which marriage might bring her; submission which must divide her irrevocably from the proud place she had once held.

She winced and turned very white as she listened to all that Mrs. Dancroft had to say, but though her heart was well-nigh broken, there was a proud note about her bearing, a touch which was wholly unconscious but which served to increase the jealous dislike which James Dancroft's mother had conceived immediately for Christine. She had grown so accustomed to think hard and ugly thoughts, hatred of Henry Fielding had become so much a part of her being, that it was but a natural step to drift into hatred for this fair young creature who had passed, in a sense, into her power.

Like most people who have cultivated one phase of feeling, cherished a particular sorrow or grievance for many years, Mrs. Dancroft had lost all sense of justice and had drifted far away from any practical power of reasoning. She had suffered so much, that now that the material side of this suffering had come to an end, she lost her head a little. Brooding these many years over her wrong had engendered cruelty, and each day spent

in the place which had really been Henry Fielding's home revealed to her some new element which stamped in her opinion the man's sin as being a hundred-fold worse than it had been.

Shrewdness there was in her, and her son had touched this shrewdness when he had warned her before coming to Hunston Manor that the only hold she had on Christine Fielding was a moral one. Therefore, though she longed to give to the world her views about Henry Fielding, though it would have been a savage delight to her to have proclaimed her wrong and his treachery on the housetop, she confined her abuse to Christine, and she set a seal upon the lips of the woman who served her, who was in reality a connection of hers, so that the curiosity of the servants and the house should not be gratified. But just because she had to endure certain things, because prudence commanded reticence as far as the world was concerned, her attitude towards Fielding's daughter in their intimate life grew more and more hostile.

Now as Christine turned and left her room she clenched her thin hands and looked at the girl's retreating figure vindictively.

She was telling herself that she would not be satisfied till she had broken down that proud bearing, till she had utterly crushed Christine's spirit. There was nothing pitiful to her about the girl's submission. She hated Christine because nothing could shake her loyalty to the dead, nothing apparently could spoil the beauty of the love which the father had inspired.

Anne was late in coming back from the village.

Her face was full of animation as she ran up the stairs to change her dress.

She had some news to give Christine when they met at dinner.

"In the village," she said, "I met your doctor's wife and her daughter. They sent their love to you; they are coming to see you to-morrow morning. I say, Mrs. Coniston's awfully smart, isn't she? They spoke to me," Anne said rather defiantly. "They asked me how you were. Of course, I was obliged to answer." Then she went on, vexed by Christine's silence and by a little frown which was contracting the delicate brows. "There is a big garden-party to be given at Westerham Park on Thursday. Mrs. Coniston has come down from London on purpose to go to it. She asked me if we were going, and when I said 'No,' that you did not want to go out anywhere, she suggested that I should go with them, and I said 'Yes,' and I want the motor-car. We may as well go in comfort. Mrs. Coniston asked me to beg you to come too."

Christine shook her head.

"I refused the invitation some days ago," she said. "I am going nowhere."

"Oh! well," said Anne Dancroft huffily, "if you want to shut yourself up that's your business, but, as I told Jim to-day, I must have some life. What's the use of coming here and getting some of what we ought to have had, if we don't enjoy ourselves?"

On Christine's face there was a look which boded new anxiety. Her thin white hands

trembled. Beside her Miss Dancroft looked opulent, very healthy and full of animal spirits. Suddenly Anne spoke to her:

"Look here! I know quite well what's in your mind," she said bluntly. "You haven't wanted me to come across any of the people you know down here because you're afraid of what I'll say to them. I may as well tell you that I'm not giving anything away. Not me! I'm not a fool, and you can be pretty sure that if *you* don't tell the truth they won't get it out of us."

Christine could not answer at once. When she spoke there were tears in her eyes and tears in her voice.

"Thank you," she said.

Anne felt awkward. She had no grace in expressing her emotions, but she did her best.

"Oh! that's all right," she said. "After all, I don't know that you have got to thank me so very much. I'm doing what Jim said I was to do; that's all. Jim's fearfully keen on keeping things to ourselves."

Christine coloured. All at once she remembered that unexpected coming of James Dancroft in the afternoon; remembered, too, the strange expression on his face as their eyes had met. She did not know whether this little speech of Anne's denoted that the man, in preaching wisdom, was working for his own people or for her, but one thing she did know, and that was that his influence, which she had recognized so clearly the very first time they had met, was dominant in her life now.

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. DUDWORTH did not see Sir George on her way through London. News had reached him that his mother was not well, and he had gone to the country. From there he wrote Constance Knox. Instead of returning the letters she had asked for, Sir George had encouraged her to write new ones. True, they were not the same letters as those of former days; there was restraint and conventionality in the manner with which Miss Knox wrote now to Sir George Narborough. Nevertheless, it flattered the man's vanity to receive these little letters, and if he had needed proof to show him how deep was his hold upon Constance, this was forthcoming when a telegram reached him from Miss Knox, saying that if Lady Ellen Narborough had need of her she would return from the Continent at once.

On the whole, Mrs. Dudworth was rather glad not to have met Narborough. Until she had seen Christine, until she had known something of what was passing with the girl, she was, of course, not in a position to advise or to suggest anything.

As she travelled down to Hunston Manor she realized, however, that the question of a speedy

marriage (on which Narborough had been so resolved) had undoubtedly been set aside.

It was not curiosity, but anxiety which ran in her heart; but not until she had her arms round Christine did she realize how much she had yearned over the girl, and how much need this young creature had of her love and sympathy.

Indeed, the coming of Margaret Dudworth was a relief so acute, that it almost unnerved Christine, notwithstanding that she knew there would be very much that she would have to explain, much which probably Mrs. Dudworth would not understand.

"My dearest child," the older woman said, as they kissed again and again. "My dear little Christine, why did you not send for me? You have lost all the good your travels did you. Thank God! Henry is not here to see you as you are looking now!"

These words pierced Christine's heart. She gave a cry and buried her head on Mrs. Dudworth's breast.

"Oh, Peggy," she said brokenly, "I do thank God that he is not here! It is my one consolation, my one joy."

Mrs. Dudworth's apprehension deepened as she listened.

"Well, now I have come," she said as cheerfully as she could, "let us hope things may be made a little better."

But Christine clinging to her, whispered:

"There is nothing that you can do, only love me."

And Margaret Dudworth strained her to her heart and kissed her again and again.

The coming of Mrs. Dudworth had provoked a general feeling of pleasure in the house, a feeling which was not long in being communicated to Mrs. Dancroft through her maid-companion.

From a sheer desire to annoy and to be disagreeable, the old woman resolved to go down to dinner that night.

Mrs. Dudworth made a very simple toilette, and when she went down to the hall just before dinner, Mrs. Dancroft was there already, sitting in a chair with her back to the fireplace. If she could have had her way, she would have cut that portrait of Henry Fielding to ribbons with knives. As it was, she never looked at it, and she always cherished the intention of having it removed.

As Margaret Dudworth glanced at the little bent form in its black garments, as she noticed the ugly mouth, the hard face, the restless burning eyes, her heart sank.

What manner of creature was this whom Christine had taken into her home, with whom she was sharing so generously all she had? And following naturally on this train of thought came one which was more painful. What power was it that had brought these people into the heart of Christine's intimate life?

Like George Narborough, at first Mrs. Dudworth had been half afraid that the girl had fallen into the hands of schemers, but this went from her altogether when she found herself in the presence of Mrs. Dancroft. For there was purpose

written in clear letters in this old woman's grim face, a purpose far removed from mere avariciousness or greed of gain.

Desirous only of helping Christine by such means in her power, Margaret Dudworth did her best to ingratiate herself with this strange old creature, but she very quickly relinquished all attempts at pleasant conversation. It was with relief that she turned to greet Anne Dancroft. Here Mrs. Dudworth met with no difficulty. Undoubtedly Anne was common, but she was a creature of flesh and blood, not ghoulish like her mother, and Anne on her side was only too ready to make friends with Mrs. Dudworth. She had heard all about this charming woman of the world from Mrs. Coniston, and had very quickly gathered that Margaret Dudworth was a person of social importance; one indeed whom Mrs. Coniston herself was eager to cultivate. Anne had no intention of letting the smallest chance slip, so she exerted herself now to make a good impression on Christine's cousin; and she succeeded, largely, of course, owing to circumstances, but not altogether on that account.

Mrs. Dudworth was quite sincere when she was discussing this girl to Christine later.

"She is really handsome, you know," she said, "and has a certain attraction of her own. With a little care she could be shaped, for she is eager to learn. Then she is young, and she wants to see life; no doubt she is selfish, but, after all, that is so human."

And Christine understood thoroughly what was lying at the back of these words. She appre-

ciated Margaret Dudworth's delicacy of thought in not speaking of Mrs. Dancroft, in not questioning, and yet paradoxically this very refinement of tact probed the wound in her heart. For she knew that this woman who loved her, this woman who had loved her father, must have grasped the real significance of the situation, must have convinced herself that it was power, an inexorable ugly power, which constrained Henry Fielding's daughter to do what she was now doing.

Mrs. Dudworth had resolved not to ask any questions. "If the child wants me to know, she will tell me," she said to herself. And yet there came almost inevitably to this woman who loved Christine the uneasy feeling that it would perhaps be better if she were to probe this matter. Where her father was concerned Christine had hardly been reasonable. Her love could, therefore, magnify and even distort. Another point in the case was that Mrs. Dudworth quickly assured herself that in the life of such a man as Henry Fielding there must have been many mysteries. She herself had never really been intimate with him, never really known him.

A little later Margaret Dudworth pondered the situation very deeply.

"It is just because she does not speak that I am afraid!" she mused. "If this thing did not touch that which she holds so vital, her father's honour, she would have brought the matter to me; but I see now that all the time we were away together, ever since Henry's death, in fact, she has been confronted with some trouble greater almost than

she can bear. And George does not see this! He is concerned only with the fear that she has fallen into the hands of unscrupulous people! He imagines that she is carried away by sentimental, not by tragic, feelings. Before I came here I was regretting that they were not married already; now I am back to my old doubt. The sympathy, the help Christine needs will never be given to her by George Narborough. This new element in her life has changed things so entirely that I should almost rejoice to know that the engagement was broken."

Nevertheless, on this subject, too, Mrs. Dudworth resolved to hold her peace.

As a matter of fact, though she was only down at Hunston Manor for two or three days, she and Christine were very little together. Anne simply usurped Mrs. Dudworth. To her great glee, Margaret Dudworth proposed going to the Westerham Park garden-party, and she offered to chaperone Miss Dancroft. Then purely in a spirit of good nature, Mrs. Dudworth made the suggestion that when she returned to town Anne should go with her and stay a week or so in London. When she had accepted Mrs. Dudworth's invitation with an alacrity and a warmth which was almost embarrassing, Anne sat down and wrote the news to her brother.

"I warn you," her letter said, "that you will find mother very set against my going, but this won't make a scrap of difference to me! She hates Mrs. Dudworth, of course, but who is there, and what is there, that mother doesn't hate? That's

what I'd like to know! Seems to me she has got worse since she came down here than she was before; and Bessie doesn't do her any good. I don't know why you let her come; I always did hate and loathe Bessie. If mother says anything to you about me, you can tell her what I've told you already, that my life has been made miserable enough all these years, and that now I've got the chance to enjoy myself I mean to make the most of it. I'd be a big fool if I didn't."

Between Christine and her cousin no explanation was given for this kindness on Mrs. Dudworth's part to Anne. But the girl did not doubt Margaret Dudworth. She felt that she was doing the best she could in her power. And in this Christine realized the clever tactics of a woman of the world. By associating herself openly with Anne Dancroft at the Westerham Park garden-party, she had, to a great extent, silenced gossip, since she had demonstrated to the curious that she knew all that was going on at Hunston Manor, and that there was no cause for mystery.

It was Anne herself who put this phase of the situation before Christine.

"Your cousin is a clever woman, and no mistake!" she said. "Of course, I don't suppose it would have reached your ears; but I've heard that the people all round about here have been simply wild with curiosity about us, and that all sorts of queer stories have been going round; but now that I have been taken out by Mrs. Dudworth, and people see that we're friends, it knocks these queer stories on the head. And that's what

you want, isn't it? You're keen on not letting anybody know the reason of our being here. I must say I think you ought to be very grateful to Mrs. Dudworth." Another time Anne said: "People think we belong to one another. I don't deceive them; in fact, when Mrs. Coniston asked me straight out if we were cousins, you and me, I just nodded my head, because," said Anne shrewdly, "that makes things easier for people to understand."

When she had gone down to Hunston, Mrs. Dudworth had not settled in her mind how long her visit was to be. After she had been there three days she felt impelled to go away. A barrier had risen between herself and Christine, and though both would have repudiated the idea hotly, the fact remained that they shunned the society of one another rather than sought it.

It was, indeed, painful in the extreme to Mrs. Dudworth to find herself in this old house, where she had spent such happy days, penned about by gloom, by a mental suffering which seemed unillumined by hope. If she could have lifted the burden from Christine, if she could have had the consolation of feeling that she could, by a single act, transplant the girl from this blighting atmosphere, there was nothing that she would not have done; but each hour that passed showed her more surely that Christine was afraid of what she was going to do.

So she resolved to leave Hunston at once. Something would have to be done to help Christine, but that something would have to be handled

with every consideration, done very carefully, so tenderly, in fact, that the girl would hardly know there were others working with her. If she stayed on at Hunston Mrs. Dudworth knew that she would have to break the silence, and she dreaded doing this in Christine's present mental condition. By taking Anne Dancroft away, she felt she would help the situation a little, for the old woman kept in her room so much that Christine could have the house to herself practically for a time, and solitude would probably be helpful to her. At any rate, the experiment was worth trying. "Who knows," Margaret Dudworth said to herself, "if I am kind to this girl I may do more for Christine than seems apparent at the moment."

CHAPTER XIX

SIR GEORGE was back in London when Mrs. Dudworth arrived.

The season was now in full swing, and he was as usual very greatly in request, despite the fact that he was now an engaged man. The absence of his *fiancée* provoked some curiosity and some disappointment, for most people were eager to see this very rich girl who was to be Lady Narborough. So much had been written about Henry Fielding's wealth at the time of his death that Christine was, all unknown to herself, a person of some importance and one whose movements were followed with interest.

It was singularly agreeable to Sir George to pose as the future master of millions, and certainly since his last visit to Hunston Manor his mind had been considerably less vexed. Christine's attitude had been so different, she had been so natural, and she had given evidence of submission, all of which tended to gratify himself, although, oddly enough, the man knew very surely that he had never absolutely won this girl's heart. That she could love, and love in an extraordinary fashion,

her devotion to her father alone proved, but whether she would ever care very deeply for the man she had promised to marry, the future alone could prove.

She had been assuredly flattered by his attentions, attracted by him, and now that she was lonely and very sad his affection was necessary to her, but love in the real meaning of the word, love such as Sir George was convinced Christine could feel, was not as yet forthcoming. In this she afforded rather a disagreeable contrast to Constance Knox.

He saw Mrs. Dudworth on her return from Hunston at the opera. She was in a box and she had a good-looking girl with her, a girl exceedingly well dressed, whom he vaguely recognized.

When Sir George made his way to the box he stared a little hardly at Anne Dancroft, and as Mrs. Dudworth introduced them he knitted his brows. When the girl was speaking to some other person he said in an undertone to Mrs. Dudworth:

"Funny, Peggy! you are always breaking out in fresh places! One never knows what you are going to do! Why on earth have you brought this girl to town?"

"To please myself, my dear George," said Mrs. Dudworth quietly, "and to please Miss Dancroft. I am rather lonely at times now that Roger is at school, and I am very fond of having a girl as a companion.'

"You would have done better to have brought Christine," the man said a little angrily.

"Christine would not come, you know that. She is a long way off from this kind of thing."

Mrs. Dudworth waved her hand to indicate the crowded opera house.

"The longer she stays in her present groove the farther away she will be," said Narborough; then he added: "Peggy, I'm horribly disappointed. I hoped all sorts of things when you went down. I know that you have a good deal of power over Christine. I expected you to have urged her to do the things she ought to do."

Then Margaret Dudworth spoke out:

"George," she said, "there is only one power which can lift that girl out of her present life, and that power is not mine to give; nor, I am sadly afraid, is it yours."

"What *do* you mean?" the young man asked impatiently; and she answered:

"I mean that if Christine really loved you, if you were really the one creature in the world to her, you would not need me to help you; she would just turn to you naturally, she would cling to you, she would tremble at the thought of losing you, and she would let you order her life in every way."

Sir George's face flushed.

"Thanks!" he said, in a disagreeable tone. "Now I know your view, and I know just exactly what to expect."

He got up to leave her, but Mrs. Dudworth put her hand on his arm.

"We are not going to quarrel. That would be so foolish; but sometimes I feel I must speak the truth, and, believe me, it is not only for Christine's sake that I worry about the future.

I am fond of you; I don't want you to be miserable."

"You are awfully considerate," said Sir George, with the supercilious smile, "but I believe I can take care of my future."

He removed his arm from her hold, and left the box without exchanging a word with Anne Dancroft, who chose to construe this into a slight.

"I am sure I wish any woman joy of him," she said. "Mrs. Coniston was raving about him the other day. She said that lots of women were madly jealous of Christine Fielding. Well, I don't envy her! I tell you what I think, she's worth something better than that!"

"George is a type of man," said Mrs. Dudworth, after a little pause, "which you will meet very frequently now that you have come out into the world. He does not wear his heart on his sleeve, and he has been brought up to think of himself before anybody else. The majority of men are made selfish by education."

"Well, I daresay he is very good-looking and all that," Anne answered, "and I suppose his education's all right; but I simply can't stand him. He is so cold and stuck up. I suppose he'll say all sorts of nasty things about me. I saw him eyeing me as if I were an animal out of the Zoo!"

Mrs. Dudworth laughed.

"Oh no, my dear, George will say nothing. And, in any case, you are with me, that will protect you, although so far there is nothing to be said about you one way or another. It lies in your own hands to make friends."

And to this Anne Dancroft nodded her head; and then she said:

"Anyhow, I am enjoying myself. It is all so wonderful to me. I never thought life could be so beautiful.

And she spoke with so much honesty, so much real enthusiasm, that Mrs. Dudworth felt pleased with her.

Anne was proving an interesting experiment. The girl was so willing to take hints, so anxious, indeed, to make herself what she called the "real thing;" and then she was ambitious. Therefore, the future, as far as she was concerned, was hopeful enough. In any case it was really pleasant to watch this young creature enjoy herself, to see her nature expand and the bitterness which now and then had marred it drop away. On more than one occasion also Anne would discuss Christine Fielding, and it gave the woman who listened almost a sense of happiness to realize that her girl had conquered this other girl, and that it needed very little to make Anne Dancroft a devoted friend. It was while Anne was in town that Sir George went down again to Hunston. He called in the morning after this visit to give Mrs. Dudworth personal news of Christine.

A glance at him showed her that he was in good spirits.

"Well," he said, as he entered Mrs. Dudworth's charming drawing-room and found her arranging some flowers. "Well, it is all settled. We are to be married very quietly in either August or September. I did my best to make it earlier,

but Christine begged for a little longer time and I had to give in. We shall go abroad, and, I shall keep her abroad till Christmas, and then we shall go down to my mother and, after a flying visit to Monte Carlo in the early spring, we shall start things going here. I am in treaty now for a house which I think would suit us admirably. They want rather a big price; but Christine can afford a big price."

Mrs. Dudworth paused a moment or two and then she said:

"And—and, of course, you will sell the Bedford Square house!"

"Oh! of course," said Sir George. "Christine is leaving all these matters in my hands," he added.

"Fortunately, they are very clever hands," Mrs. Dudworth remarked with a smile.

Sir George set himself on the end of the sofa.

"Well, Peggy," he said, "aren't you going to congratulate me?"

"Certainly I am! But you know by this time that I am sincerely, affectionately interested in you."

"And you are very fond of Christine," the young man said, "therefore you must be pleased now that everything is definitely settled."

Mrs. Dudworth held up a bunch of roses and looked at them admiringly and sniffed them appreciatively; then, as she put them down, she asked:

"How is Christine; how is she looking?"

"She says she is quite well, but she looks——"

he paused; and then he asked, with a return to his old irritability, "How do you expect she would look living in such a miserable atmosphere? I called on Dr. Brathmore before I came away and I asked him to take her in hand."

"That was right," said Mrs. Dudworth, but she sighed. She was forced to question him, although she felt that his answers would be unsatisfactory. "Does—does she still seem very unhappy?" she inquired.

"Very," answered Sir George; "but I am not expecting any change, you know, my dear Peggy, till after our marriage; then she will be completely uprooted, she will have all sorts of other things to think about; and I tell you frankly I don't intend to let her sit down and weep and mourn; she will have had a full year for tears, that is quite long enough."

"Yes, too long by many months according to the world's idea." The question she longed to put faltered on Mrs. Dudworth's lips. She approached the subject indirectly. "Did you have the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Dancroft?" she asked.

He shook his head with a faint smile.

"Not this time; it appears she keeps her room. I advised Christine to get rid of her as soon as she could."

"And what did she say?"

There was real eagerness in Margaret Dudworth's voice now.

"Oh! she saw that I was right; she told me that she would discuss the matter with Miss Dan-

croft when she returned. I think I convinced her that if these people have some claim on her father's estate there is no real necessity that she should be bothered with them about her all the time." He got up as he spoke. "You'll run down soon again, won't you?" he said; "and look here, Peggy, you might try and interest her in clothes. It is time, for instance, that she had something new; she is wearing the shabbiest black gown imaginable. Really she is losing her looks. Of course, that will all come back again." Sir George had strolled to the window and looked out as he spoke. A hansom had pulled up and a man was alighting from it. "You entertain in the morning?" Sir George asked. "Someone has just arrived. I thought I was the only privileged person, Peggy."

"It is no one for me," answered Mrs. Dudworth; "I expect it will be Anne's brother; she wrote and asked him to call, I know."

"Oh!" said Sir George, and his face clouded; then he said: "And how is the experiment working?"

"I like Anne," Mrs. Dudworth said in her decided manner. "She lacks a good deal of what the world calls manner and form, but she is sincere, frank and truthful."

"Oh! delightful," said Sir George. "And has she told you anything about her mother, and why they should establish themselves at Hunston?"

"No," said Mrs. Dudworth, "she has told me nothing, neither have I asked any questions. It is Christine who ought to give you this information."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I shirked the matter. At first I regarded it seriously, but now I have convinced myself that it is only one of Christine's follies. Possibly, in the long, long ago, this old woman, or her husband, or someone belonging to her, must have lent Henry Fielding money—he began with the proverbial half-crown, didn't he?—and this, of course, would constitute in Christine's opinion a life-long obligation. Good-bye, Peggy. When the house is bought you must come and give your ideas as to decorating it; your ideas are worth having."

He kissed her hand and then went away.

On the staircase he came face to face with James Dancroft. Sir George stared at the other man in the most disagreeable manner possible, and Dancroft looked back at him with just as much arrogance.

Sir George noticed at that moment that there was a change in the other man's appearance. He resented the improvement; the rough labourer had disappeared. James Dancroft not only looked handsome, but he was well dressed and had a touch of what society calls a smart air about him.

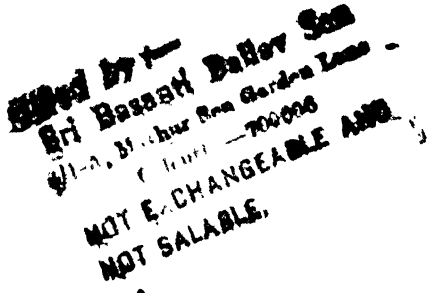
The two men passed one another with a sense of mutual dislike and contempt. It angered Sir George to realize that it was Christine's money which had worked such a marked transformation in Dancroft.

"This shall be the first thing I shall take in hand," he said to himself as he passed out of the house. "These people have had more than enough, and I mean to keep a strict hand over all the

charity claims. If Peggy hadn't come on the scene and taken this girl up, I should have gone into this matter now; but it is better to let everything stand over till we are married."

He spent a busy day. There was a yacht on the market which he coveted, and the autumn shooting to be arranged for. Narborough had never been poor; but he had certainly never been rich; life had a very pleasant aspect for him. He grew tenderer in his thoughts for Christine, but he also grew more and more resolved on a certain point.

"She must belong to me completely. I must be master. I will share with no one living or dead!" he said to himself decisively.



CHAPTER XX

ANNE DANCROFT had prepared herself for some objection on her brother's part to the move she had made, and the objection was not slow in coming. The girl listened, however, to all that Dancroft had to say impatiently enough.

"You can go on just as much as ever you like, Jim," she said coolly; "it won't have any effect. You've got your view of life, mother's got hers, I've got mine! And if you think I am going to live the sort of dead-alive existence all my life you've made a great mistake. Look here, Jim," the girl said a little excitedly, "you ought to remember all the fine things that were promised me in the old days."

"I made you no promises," James Dancroft said sternly.

But Anne tossed her head.

"I know that, but they were made all the same by the one who practically put us where we are now."

"Perhaps I've been mistaken," the man said, after a long pause; "but I am disappointed; disappointed in you and in my mother. She goes

too far in one direction and you are going far too far in another. I wanted to see you both lifted out of poverty; I wanted to see her surrounded with comfort in her old age, and I wanted you to have a proper home and——"

"And I suppose," interrupted Anne with a sneer, "you didn't want anything for yourself? The gutter was good enough for you."

Dancroft answered this roughly:

"You'll go back and join mother," he said. "You've no right to be here."

"What do you mean by no right? Everybody's got a right to make the best use of a chance. I don't see what business it is of yours about my coming to stay with Mrs. Dudworth. If anybody had wanted to cut up rough it was that girl at Hunston; but she isn't like you, Jim, she seemed glad I should have a chance of enjoying myself."

There was a crimson flush on the man's face, and he looked very steadily at his sister as he said:

"And I suppose she helped you to come away? You have shown that you've got a rare way of spending, Anne. I'll be bound there isn't a penny left of the money that was given you just before you went to Hunston?"

"I don't count pennies now-a-days," said Anne doggedly. "It's share and share with us remember; and if she did give me money, well, I consider I had a full right to have it."

But James Dancroft banged his fist down on the table near.

"No; that is just what you haven't got!

And understand me, Anne, this is the last time you'll go to her. Let me only know that you do this again, and I shall deal with you pretty sharply!"

"Then give me my share," said Anne, turning on him hotly. "Let me have what I've got to have, and let me do what I will with my own life."

She spoke with anger, and this anger seemed to calm Dancroft.

"Nothing has been arranged as yet," he said. "This lies to a great extent in her hands. I'm not against you taking your chance as you call it, for my own chance has come to me. I have a place of responsibility, a place in which I can show what I am made of, and I mean to earn my money. I mean to get into a wider life away from all that has so crippled and embittered me ever since I could remember."

He spoke earnestly, and there was an expression on his face which Anne had never seen there before; but she was vexed with him.

"Well, I suppose you don't want me to work, do you? Because if you do, I am afraid you'll have more disappointment."

Before he could answer there was a tap at the door, and Mrs. Dudworth entered the room. She greeted Anne's brother with the charm which was so natural to her.

"I have come to see if I cannot induce you to stay to luncheon, Mr. Dancroft," she said.

But he reverted instantly to his old churlish attitude, and declined the invitation.

"I've got work to do," he said. "I cannot

afford to be idle. I only came this morning because I wanted to tell my sister that I consider she has made a great mistake in coming here."

Though the man's manner and his words were most disagreeable to her, Mrs. Dudworth did not let this escape her.

"Oh! Mr. Dancroft," she said. "If there is any blame, I am the one to be scolded, for I persuaded your sister to come. I thought perhaps she would enjoy a few days in town, and I am always very glad to have a girl with me."

"Well, Anne knows what I think," said Dancroft in the same ungracious way, and he took up his hat. "I'll come and take her down to Hunston at the end of the week," he added, and then with a bow he took up his hat and passed out.

As he went Anne burst into tears.

"And when he does come I shan't go!" she said between her sobs. "Jim can be as beastly as he likes; I shan't go! He is almost as bad as mother. I see very plainly that I must get everything fixed up, and pretty soon, too," Anne went on excitedly. "When I've got my own money sure, then I can snap my fingers at them. I don't know why this shouldn't be done at once. If Jim won't hurry about this I shall just take it to her. She's ready enough, in fact, she's only waiting!"

"Do you mean Christine?" Mrs. Dudworth asked in a low voice.

And Anne nodded her head as she dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Yes, of course I mean her. If she hadn't known she'd got to do big things for us, it isn't likely she would have given in to us as she has, is it? And if mother could get what she wanted, and Jim can get what he wants, it's precious hard lines if I can't get what I want!" Then, as she saw Mrs. Dudworth's face, a certain compunction and a certain fear took possession of Anne. "Oh! I didn't intend to say so much," she said. "It seems mean to be talking about her business, and I'm not mean, really. Besides, I'm sorry for her, you know I am; she's had an awful lot to bear, and she's so plucky and so good!"

Mrs. Dudworth's lips quivered, but she stretched out her hand to the girl. These last words went straight to her heart.

"I will write to your brother," she said. "Perhaps I may be able to induce him to take a more lenient view of what after all is a very ordinary matter. Now dry your eyes, and let us go out for a little while. It is a lovely morning."

She spoke cheerfully, but in reality Margaret Dudworth's heart was weighted with anxiety. The news Sir George had brought her had startled her a good deal; but when it was set beside the revelation of the truth which Anne Dancroft had made so unconsciously, it perplexed as well as startled.

What was to lie in the immediate future?

* * * * * *

On leaving Mrs. Dudworth's house Dancroft

went back to the city for an hour or so, and then travelled down to Hunston Manor.

He had sent a telephone message, announcing his arrival, and this time a motor was in waiting at the station.

As they passed through the village and approached the grounds, Dancroft stopped the chauffeur. He had caught sight of Christine. It seemed to him that she had made a motion with her hand that he should stop. At any rate, he alighted and went through the trees to join her.

The day was lovely, the world wore its fairest aspect. It brought a pang to the man's heart to see how fragile this girl looked.

Her black gown seemed to strike an incongruous note amid the splendour of the early summer colouring. In remembrance, he set her as she was now against that vision of her as she had been the night when he had first seen her.

They did not shake hands, and he rushed instantly into speech.

"I have come down," he said in his blunt way, "on purpose to see you. I have something to say to you."

And Christine answered:

"I am glad you have come, for I have something to say to you."

They walked away from the path under the trees out towards the direction of the river.

"I have seen my sister," Dancroft said abruptly. "I don't approve of what she is doing, and I have told her so; above all, I strongly object to her coming to you for money."

Christine coloured painfully, and a little haughtiness crept into her manner as she said:

"Need that really trouble you?"

"Yes," he said, uncompromisingly; "and it troubles me a very good deal," he added.

They walked on, and with a little sigh Christine took her hat from her head and brushed her brow with her hand.

"You approach the very matter on which I am anxious to speak to you, Mr. Dancroft," she said.

"Yes?"

"I—I want something settled," Christine said. "I—it is above all necessary now that I should know just exactly where I stand. I am prepared to do everything that you may consider right and just; but—but I want to have a little of the weight of the burden lifted."

They had come to a spot where the ground sloped gradually; in front of them stretched a beautiful view. This had been a favourite spot with Henry Fielding, and some chairs were always placed under the trees here in summer time.

Dancroft pulled forward one of these chairs.

"Sit down," he said.

Christine obeyed him. Just for an instant she closed her eyes, and then she opened them to look at the familiar scene in front through a mist of tears.

"I hope I shall be able to make you understand what is in my heart. I want you all to be satisfied," she said in a low voice, "and then I want my life to belong to myself."

"You mean," the man answered her a little disagreeably, "that you contemplate sharing this life with another person. It is because of your marriage, which I hear has been definitely arranged to take place a few weeks hence, that you want to have things settled?"

She flushed and then she paled.

"Yes—because of that, but not altogether because of that. Mr. Dancroft, I—I did not quite know what I was undertaking, what the coming of your mother into this, my own home, was to mean to me, or I doubt if I should have had the courage to have met her wishes as I have done."

Dancroft was biting his lip rather savagely.

"Well, I warned you," he said roughly. "You can't say I didn't tell you that I thought you were doing too much. I asked you if there wasn't someone who could work with you—someone to whom you could turn, and you answered me that there was no one."

"And I answered you truthfully. There was no one—there is no one who can help me in this matter."

"What! You are going to marry, and yet you stand quite alone to fight your troubles? That seems queer!"

Christine closed her eyes again. She had brushed the tears away.

"I am dealing with you straightforwardly. I am putting my position before you just as it is. The cause for which I have done what I have done is dearer to me a hundredfold than it was. I do not look for sympathy, even for comprehension

from you; but somehow I feel that you will be just."

He thanked her, but there was a mocking sound in his voice as he spoke.

"Do not credit me with imaginary virtues. There has been so very little justice in my life up to now, that I am not quite sure that I know how it ought to go; but you are wrong if you think I'm stupid; you make a big mistake. I quite understand that you are most anxious to have all disagreeable things wrapped up and put away on a shelf before you marry this fine gentleman with his fine title! Well, you know, of course, that this doesn't lie in my hands. The person with whom you will have to come to terms is my mother."

He was speaking with deliberate intention to hurt.

Sir George Narborough had lost no time. He had communicated the information that his marriage was definitely fixed to the heads of the office in the City. The matter had been freely discussed in Dancroft's presence and as freely criticized.

When he had gone to see his sister that morning, a sullen rage, a rage curiously tinged with jealousy which would not be set aside, was seething in his heart; and when he had come face to face with Sir George on the stairs, it would have been some small gratification to him to have lifted his strong right arm and struck out at the other man.

For Narborough was the type of man he loathed. The knowledge that such a man held first place in Christine Fielding's life, and presumably in her

heart, too, brought into existence a rush of bitter feelings; and yet, deep, deep down below them there was a sense of sorrow, for now he knew the quality of this girl's nature, and it hurt him to think that she should give herself and all that was most precious to her into the keeping of such a man as George Narborough.

Christine had winced as he had spoken. She did not know until this moment how much she had built upon obtaining his help. She did not answer him immediately, but when she did so, she said in a very low voice:

"That closes all discussion. Even if I would permit myself to approach your mother I should know before doing so that I should meet with nothing but the bitterest treatment; that I should have to listen once again to all the old horrible abuse which is so hurtful to me to hear."

Her weary voice, her pathetic look stirred something deeper and stronger than anger and jealousy in the man's heart. Nevertheless, he made no change in his rough manner.

"I don't suggest that you must do this," he said. "I go back to my old argument. You ought to have someone with you—someone who could act for you. That's a nice woman with whom Anne is staying now. Why don't you ask her help?"

He saw her close her eyes and involuntarily the girl's thought escaped her lips.

"Peggy loved my father. She thought him all that was good and honourable."

Dancroft shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, then, why not let your future husband and my mother fight this out."

Christine put up her hands as though to push away something which was definitely threatening her.

The way in which she said "No, no," was in itself a confession, and just for an instant the hot blood flooded Dancroft's face. It gave him a strange sense of exultation to realize that despite the fact that she was promised in marriage to Narborough, in reality this other man stood outside her intimate life. Following on this, however, came the swift thought that possibly it was because she cared so much for this man that she dreaded the effect the knowledge of the truth might have upon him.

Perhaps he hardly realized himself how such a thought swayed him; indeed, it was possible that the man had never paused to take count of what was passing with himself where Christine Fielding was concerned, or how consciously her influence was permeating his every thought, his every action.

He got up and moved a few yards away from her, and Christine looked at him with something like despair in her eyes. She felt that he would do nothing for her, and there came sweeping back upon her all the miserable tumult which had possessed her heart these many weeks. It had been such a natural impulse which had urged her to listen to Sir George's pleading. She was practically worn out with the mental conflict, she was yearning for tranquillity. The void left in her

life by her father's death seemed to have grown wider and deeper of late. All her life she had been surrounded with tenderness, with the most delicate care. The bleak atmosphere in which she lived now drove her to look for some protection. Was it so wonderful that she should let herself imagine that she would find this protection with the man she had promised to marry? Was it so wonderful that she should turn from the cruelty, the bleakness, the hatred, and hope to find in love a consolation from all this?

It was fitting to the situation that it should be Dancroft who bluntly led her to face the reality, who brought her sharply away from dreams. The suggestion that she should let Sir George Narborough deal with his mother was such an impossibility that Christine saw with clear eyes the impossibility of all the rest.

CHAPTER XXI

FURTHER discussion between them was, however, prevented by the arrival of Dr. Brathmore on the scene. He had advanced across the turf so noiselessly that Christine gave a start when she heard him speak.

"I have been up to the house," he said, "and I was told I should find you somewhere in the grounds. I am anxious to know how you are feeling to-day."

Dr. Brathmore just nodded to James Dancroft. His manner was not cordial. It was the first time that he had come in direct contact with the young man, and he had no very pleasant feeling towards either Dancroft or his mother.

"You know I have to send my daily bulletin to Sir George," James Dancroft heard the doctor say, as he walked past them and left them alone.

"I am much better," Christine said nervously. "I—I am really quite well."

Dr. Brathmore was holding her little wrist between his strong fingers. He pulled up a chair and sat down beside her.

"I am sorry to contradict you," he said; "but

you are no better and you certainly are not well, Christine. You want change, you ought to get away from here."

"Have you forgotten that I was travelling for so many months only a little while ago?"

"I should not prescribe movement," Dr. Brathmore answered. "Change need not necessarily mean that. On the contrary, I want you to have rest. I want you to be out in the open air as much as possible."

"No air could be better than this," Christine replied.

Dr. Brathmore sat back and looked at her anxiously and affectionately. He was very attached to Christine; he had known her ever since her birth and her mother's death; she was to him as dear as his own child, and he was sorely troubled about her now.

"Why do you not come to us as you used to?" he asked, when he broke the silence. "You were once so fond of wandering in and out of our house, and you used to turn to us naturally, Christine, to share with us your joys and your little sorrows."

"Everything in my life was changed absolutely when my father died," the girl answered in a low voice.

"My dear," Dr. Brathmore said, leaning forward in his chair, "I believe if your father could know what a lasting shadow he has left on you he would endure a veritable torment. It was just because he was so much to you and left so much for you to do that you should try and put away this overwhelming grief. But there, dear child," he

tapped her hand as he spoke, "I won't bother you any more just now. I must just see what I can do to patch you up and get you strong for your marriage. Once you are in Sir George's hands I shan't worry about you. And now I must be off; but always remember, Christine dear, we are waiting ready and eager to have you with us as you used to come; always remember that you are very dear to us."

Dr. Brathmore walked briskly away and turned towards the gates, but before he could reach them, he heard someone coming after him, someone calling him by name. It was James Dancroft.

The younger man was slightly out of breath when he reached Dr. Brathmore.

"I wish to speak to you about my mother," he said. "I want you to be so good as to come back and see her, if you can spare the time."

Just for an instant Dr. Brathmore paused; then he turned on his heel and the two men walked back towards the house together.

As they went, the doctor asked a good many questions of Dancroft.

"Of course, I have seen your mother driving," he said, "and I have remarked that she looks in bad health."

"She used to be very strong," Dancroft said, "but many adverse circumstances have worked to bring about ill-health. Of late years I believe she has suffered a good deal. You will find her difficult; in fact, it is just possible she may refuse to let you attend her at all."

Dr. Brathmore laughed.

"I shall not force myself upon her, but if I can be of any assistance, of course my services are at her command."

It was not till they were about to enter the house, which had such a lovely and picturesque look nestling amongst the trees, that the younger man put the question which he was burning to utter, which was, in reality, the reason which had sent him to seek the man beside him.

"You find Miss Fielding ill?" he asked.

Dr. Brathmore just glanced at him as he answered "Yes."

"There is nothing radically wrong?"

Dr. Brathmore shrugged his shoulders. "Her mother died from heart failure. She was always very delicate. You know how Henry Fielding died. A year ago I should have considered Christine as healthy a girl as one could find; to-day, however, she is very far removed from the Christine of a year ago. To use a very common expression, Mr. Dancroft, she is killing herself with grief, wearing herself out with some trouble which apparently she will not share with anyone. I want her to go away from here, but she will not leave. However," Dr. Brathmore spoke briskly, "in a little while she will have a husband to look after her, and then I trust things will be altogether different."

As they passed into the hall Dr. Brathmore paused in front of Henry Fielding's portrait.

"It was a very beautiful thing," he said involuntarily, "the love which existed between that father and his child—a rare love, Mr. Dancroft—something one doesn't often come across."

"You knew him well?"

The words spoken abruptly were impelled, as it were, from Dancroft's lips.

"Yes, I knew him very well, and I think without exaggeration, that Henry Fielding was one of the best men it has been my lot to meet. He had a heart of gold!"

Just for an instant the younger man shivered, and then the old rough bitterness came to him.

"Yes, people who are made of money generally have hearts of gold," he said with a sneer. "Now if you will wait here I will go and see if I can persuade my mother to receive you."

James Dancroft did not return to London till the evening. There had been a great scene with his mother, and if Bessie had not worked with him, the medical man would have been sent away; but after a great deal of delay and difficulty, an interview had taken place between Dr. Brathmore and his new patient.

It was after this interview, after Dr. Brathmore had left the house, that the scene referred to was enacted between Dancroft and his mother. The old woman openly attacked her son.

"You think I am blind," she said; "you think I don't know what is going on; but let me tell you, Jim, I'm neither blind nor daft! You are working against me just as Anne has gone against me. There's no loyalty in either of you, no sense of what is right; you've grown out of memory of all that happened; you've utterly forgotten your father and his cruel death."

"Forgotten my father!" the young man said

hoarsely. "No, no—a hundred times no! The memory of my father and of what he was is all that I have to make life worth living."

The old woman had sat and looked at him with her burning eyes and thin lips set in a hard smile.

"I'll not go away from here," she said, "not for a dozen doctors! And so you may let that girl know as soon as you like! It's all a plot, all a plan. I am to be turned into an invalid, and so got out of the house. Well, understand once and for all, I'll not go from here, Jim, till I'm carried out. Let her go, if anyone must go!"

Much she said in this strain, pouring out invectives against Fielding in the old approved fashion and turning the stream of her hatred on Christine.

Her abuse was intolerable to the young man, and for the first time her son rebuked her; for the first time he let her see how far they were divided in feeling, she and he; and when this knowledge came to her, Mrs. Dancroft sat very still for a while, then she laughed.

"It's easy to see," she said, "which way the wind blows! She has soft eyes, so you turn your back upon your father's grave! She has a soft voice, so you put your father's wrongs under your heel. She's young and fresh, and I'm naught but an old woman, worn with suffering, bowed down with shameful wrong! Yes, I'm naught but an old woman; I don't count. It is Christine Fielding, daughter of an abominable scoundrel and miserable thief, who counts first with my son! Oh! I know! I know!"

"Mother!" The word escaped the young man's lips like a fierce cry. Just for a moment he stood and looked into those hard, mocking, bitter old eyes; then he swung about and without another word went out of the room.

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. CONISTON had lost no time in making use of her slight acquaintance with Anne Dancroft to bring about a renewal of her friendship with Mrs. Dudworth.

In the old days, when she had been simple and her greatest excitement had been paying visits to Hunston Manor, Enid Brathmore had been a favourite with Mrs. Dudworth; but marriage had changed her so entirely; she had grown so worldly, she was so superficial, that she had slipped out of favour with Christine's cousin.

Anne was not so discriminating. She thought Mrs. Coniston very pretty and very fashionable, and was quite ready to respond to all the younger woman's little attentions. Nor did she even once guess at the truth, which was that Enid Coniston regarded her with a great deal of jealousy. The why and the wherefore of the Dancrofts' appearance at Hunston remained still a mystery, but there was nothing mysterious about Miss Dancroft's expensive clothes, or the fact that she seemed to have plenty of money. And money was so essential to Mrs. Coniston!

Many a time she said to herself:

"I was Christine's only girl friend; surely I have a better right to get things from her than these people have? I don't believe they *are* relations! We never heard anything about them when Mr. Fielding was alive. One of these days I shall speak openly to Christine."

Yet though she was jealous she was careful to play her cards well, and she made a great fuss with Anne. Indeed, she went so far as to suggest that when the visit with Mrs. Hardworth came to an end Anne should stay with her.

Miss Dancroft could not, however, accept this invitation without reference to her brother, not because she was anxious to render him obedience, but because she was very eager to settle the question of her future—settle it, that is to say, as far as money was concerned. So important was this point to Anne, that after turning the matter over in her mind some time she determined to write to Christine. In her frank way she went straight to the point—she put the whole situation before Miss Fielding.

"There is money to come to me, so Jim tells me, but it's for you to decide what I am to have and when. Well, will you please let me know how much I am going to have, and, above all, when I can count upon dealing with it independently of my people?"

The same post which brought this letter from Anne carried one also to Christine from George Narborough.

Sir George wrote, giving particulars about the

house which he desired her to buy, about the yacht and about all the arrangements which he was making for the autumn and for the winter; and at the end of the letter he put: "Brathmore writes me that you really need change of air. Why will you not stay with my mother for a little while? It seems so strange that you two should not be together at times. My dear mother is only waiting for the opportunity of showing you affection and kindness. I should have suggested bringing her to you at Hunston, but I feel sure whilst you have these people there you don't care about having other guests. In a little while, dearest, I hope you will let me discuss the question of these Dancrofts with you. I think this is one of the matters which we must settle right away before we marry."

To both these letters Christine replied by telegram.

To Anne her message ran:

"The matter you speak of shall be arranged with as little delay as possible. Will write in two or three days' time."

To Narborough she sent the following message:

"I am coming up to town end of week; will go into everything with you thoroughly."

When these had been sent, she wrote a letter, It was to James Dancroft:

"DEAR MR. DANCROFT" (it ran), "I received a communication from Mr. Millward yesterday in which he informed me that you have expressed a wish to have some responsible position

abroad. It was not necessary that this matter should be referred to me, but as Mr. Millward has brought it under my notice, I write to say that if my co-operation is necessary to procure you this post you may rely upon having it. At the same time it is most important that I should see you before you go. For this purpose I shall be in town at the end of this week, and I shall esteem it a favour if you will come and see me. You will find me at my father's house in Bedford Square. There are various matters which must be settled between us without further delay."

Then Christine wrote to Mrs. Dudworth a tender little letter, in which she told her cousin that matters of business would take her to London in a couple of days' time.

"Do not be vexed with me, dearest" (she wrote), "if I tell you that I have decided to go to the old house in Bedford Square. I have a fancy to be there. Above all, I must go through the house and see what is in it and make my plans in connection with these things."

Two days later Miss Fielding left Hunston Manor. She took her maid with her. There were responsible caretakers in the London house; it had only been necessary to send word to say she was coming; she found all prepared for her arrival.

Mrs. Dudworth had sent in a quantity of lovely flowers to greet her, but she had not written. There

was only one letter awaiting Christine, and that was from Dancroft.

Sir George, not being aware of this move on Christine's part, was waiting to hear from her on her arrival. He naturally supposed that she would go to Mrs. Dudworth's house when she did come.

Despatching a telegram stating that she would be glad to see Mr. Dancroft that evening after dinner, Christine then made a pilgrimage through the large house.

It was a veritable museum. Treasures of all kinds, rarest examples of porcelain, tapestry and pictures were to be found on every side.

Christine had not realized the extent of her possessions in this respect. Her father had been accustomed to occupy the house when he had been in London, but he had contented himself with one of the smaller rooms.

In this room, however, evidence was given of the man's exquisite taste; the appointments were perfect, and here, the only picture hung on the walls, was a protrait of Christine's mother, painted very soon after her marriage.

It was in this room that Christine resolved to receive James Dancroft.

Unconsciously the journey from Hunston, the change of atmosphere, stimulated Christine. She felt calmer and stronger than she had felt for some time, and this although she was strung up to attack a most difficult task. It was a hot day, so she had discarded her black clothes and wore one of her favourite old white gowns.

Dinner was served her in one of the smaller

rooms, a room hung with almost priceless old prints, and about nine o'clock her maid announced to her that Mr. Dancroft had arrived.

Christine hardly knew him when she went to meet him. He wore evening dress, and new as the garb was to him he looked extraordinarily well in it.

After a moment's hesitation she held out her hand to him whilst she thanked him for coming. Dancroft barely touched her hand, however.

Coffee was brought in to them, and cigarettes and cigars, but though he took a cup of coffee he refused to smoke. He was looking about him and his eyes were riveted on the portrait.

"That was my mother," Christine said in a low voice.

"Yes, I thought so," he answered. Then he added, "You are like her."

But even as the words were spoken he had a pang. He remembered what Dr. Brathmore had said, and he looked at Christine with a wealth of unconscious anxiety in his eyes.

"Are you better?" he asked.

Christine coloured and said:

"Yes, I really feel better, and I shall feel much better after we have settled things, Mr. Dancroft."

Instantly he became his customary self.

"It is not so easy to settle things," he said.

Christine sighed.

"Do I not know that? Won't you sit down?"

She sat herself beside the table on which her maid had put a blotting-pad, ink and paper.

He did not take the big chair she indicated, but

sat on the opposite side of the table. It gave him a strange thrill to find himself alone with her in this fashion, to be able to sit and look at her as freely as he liked. To-night it seemed to him that he was seeing her real beauty for the first time. There was a serenity in her expression. The tortured look in her eyes had gone. Whilst he rejoiced in these evidences of mental calmness, in this proof that she was really better, her tranquillity only served to set her still farther away from him.

"I suppose you have something to propose," he said abruptly, "otherwise you would not have brought me here."

"All I have to propose is that we should come to some definite understanding as regards your claim."

"My mother's claim, you mean," the man said quickly. "I am already satisfied with what has been done."

"I can't deal with your mother, Mr. Dancroft," said Christine almost firmly. "I have done my best to meet her. I have fallen in with all of her wishes as far as I possibly could, but——"

She broke off and then she began to speak of Anne.

An angry look came into the man's face. He put a question to her bluntly:

"Has Anne been writing to you?"

And when she answered "Yes," and he muttered something under his breath, Christine asked him boldly:

"Why are you angry with your sister? If I must speak frankly I consider that she is treating

me far better than you are. She wants to come to a definite understanding, and after that she goes her way and I shall go mine. Since I have recognized to the full the fact that your mother, your sister, yourself, have the most serious claim upon me, there remain only details to be settled."

"Matters," Dancroft said in his rough way, "which should be dealt with by lawyers."

But Christine contradicted this.

"No; you know how I stand; you know what I am struggling for. When we do agree, then the actual drawing up of settlements must, of course, go into other hands, but I will not have any lawyers probing this; I will not have the whole matter subjected to examination. I will do it myself."

The man did not speak to her immediately; then he said:

"Believe me, Miss Fielding, I am absolutely sincere when I advise you to consult others. No doubt you have not realized this, but there is a phase of the position which is peculiarly unpleasant, at least to me; I allude to the fact that we, my mother, my sister and myself, are already stamped in the eyes of those about you as people who are sponging on you. I am not even sure if they do not go farther and regard us as blackmailers. I am not made of fine stuff, still I do think I have let you understand that I appreciate your sentiment for your father, even if I cannot sympathize with it. Now it seems to me that, in justice to yourself and to us, you ought to take counsel with someone."

There was nothing of his usual roughness in his voice; indeed, he spoke almost gently, and his words made a great impression on Christine.

"I never looked at the matter from this point of view," she said. "It—it changes things."

She leaned her elbow on the table, and rested her face on her hand.

"I had hoped," she said, in a low voice, "that we might have definitely fixed a settlement to-night. I am disappointed."

"As far as I am concerned," said Dancroft, "we have reached a settlement. Through your influence I am now in a position to make a life for myself, perhaps to make a fortune. Anne will not give you very much trouble, but I am afraid I can in no way answer for my mother. It is she, after all, who has suffered the most. Her life has been blighted, her nature transformed by unprecedented suffering. I verily believe she is alive now only because she has resolved to obtain some satisfaction, and now that this chance has come she is not prepared to cede it easily."

After a little pause the young man went on in the same gentle way:

"Money as money counts for very little with my mother. I know that you are longing to have your life to yourself, to be free from the constant bitter reminder of what your father has done; but it is just here that I dare not hold out any hopes to you. I dare not interfere, and because of this I earnestly advise you to consult either with your lawyers, with your friends, or with your future husband."

He waited for her to speak, but no words would come; then, going back to his customary manner, he said:

"As regards my sister, please leave her in my hands." Then he rose to go. "I am sorry," he said, abruptly, "I cannot be of more use to you."

Christine rose too.

"I shall have to think over what you have just been saying. I—I hardly see my way." Then hurriedly she said: "There is one thing I have always wanted to ask you. Can you give me any information about my father's very early life? Thinking over things as I do think, I feel that perhaps there may be some who have a claim upon me, kith and kin of my father's to whom even a little money would be a boon."

James Dancroft shook his head.

"I can't be of the least help to you in this, for I know absolutely nothing beyond the fact that your father began life as a workhouse boy. I fancy if he had belonged to any folk near where we were, I should have heard of it. It might be possible for you to trace out the beginning of things. But here again, if I may advise you, I would suggest that you did nothing on impulse or independently."

This time he took Christine's hand when she held it out to him.

"Why did you come to this great lonely house?" he asked her abruptly. "You want life and comfort. You should not be so much alone."

"Solitude is the nearest approach to happiness to me now," Christine answered him, "and I understand now what a solace it must have been

to my father. I used to think it was fatigue, weariness of work, which made him turn to those hours of quietness, but now I know that it must have been an ache in his heart, a perpetual ache. Oh! Mr. Dancroft, you are prejudiced against him, and I am afraid you are right to have such hard feelings, still if it could have been granted to you to have known him, if he had only lived to have carried out this great task of atonement, I am sure your feelings would have changed, I am sure, you would have found that he was not the black, unworthy man you have been taught to consider him."

Her voice was a little unsteady as she thanked him for coming. A moment later he was gone, leaving Christine conscious of a strange feeling of loneliness and regret. It was the sort of feeling which had been wont to come to her in the old days when she had driven her father to the railway station and had stood and watched the train which was carrying him away fade into the distance.

Rough, uncouth, bitter as this man Dancroft was, he yet inspired in her a sense of enormous respect. Though, of course, she could not even guess at the influence which she exercised upon him, she did feel and in a sentient manner, that a struggle was going on in his heart where she was concerned, that it was no longer easy or agreeable to him to speak of hurtful things to her; that it gave him no sort of satisfaction to triumph over her. To-night she even realized that he was wholly out of sympathy with his mother's attitude also, and that constituted a

kind of comfort which Christine eagerly grasped at.

There were, in fact, many qualities in Dancroft which appealed to her. He was so human, and, then, he was so strong, and, save where her father was concerned, she felt that he would be unprejudiced. The very hardship of his life had broadened him and strengthened in him responsibility and his power of reasoning. Indeed, sitting here thinking of him and realizing all that lay before her in the immediate future, there came to Christine the positive regret that it was not possible to her to turn to this man for practical help. She would have done so with full reliance in his judgment, in his discretion, and, even strange as it might seem, in his sympathy; yet at the mere thought of approaching George Narborough on the subject which was so sacred, so pitiful, she winced.

When she had telegraphed to Sir George saying that she would discuss all matters with him, Christine had formed in her mind the intention once again of bringing about a separation between herself and this man without giving him any explanation with regard to the Dancrofts. It had been a natural resolution, but James Dancroft's very plainly spoken words showed her that in this she had a duty to others as well as to herself. Therefore, although she hardly knew how she would go through the ordeal of putting the truth before Sir George, she realized that there was no possibility of escaping from it.

Barker came in search of her as she sat lost in the turmoil of her thoughts.

"It is getting late, miss; you ought to go to bed," she said.

And Christine got up with a sigh.

Sleep would be far from her this night. Still, of course, she must go through the pretence of finding rest.

The maid had arranged to sleep very near to her young mistress. The house was so large and so lonely she thought it possible Christine might be nervous.

Barker kept awake for a long time lest Miss Christine should call to her, but at last she fell asleep, and so she was not conscious that, instead of resting in her bed, Miss Fielding was pacing the next room torturing anew her tender young heart with a sorrow which never grew less or easier to bear.

Once Christine drew near the window and stood looking out. The sound of the London traffic was strange to her ears. She missed the sweetness of the country air and the stillness. Though it was not really hot, the night seemed oppressive to her, and she drew aside the curtains and threw up the window to have as much air as possible.

It might perchance have given her a tangible sense of comfort if she could have known that the man who had left her an hour or so ago was still walking round and round the square striving in vain to find some means by which he could lift the burden from her shoulders.

His mother's cunning words had stripped a veil from Dancroft's heart. Though in the first moment he had repudiated the suggestion these

words conveyed, yet now he knew that they were pregnant with truth; he knew that it was not sympathy alone, or pity, or a man's natural repugnance to struggle against a woman which inspired in him such a vital interest in Christine Fielding; it was a sentiment stronger than all these, stronger than hate, than resentment and sullen revenge—it was love: the kind of love which is only possible to such a man as he, and which in its intensity, carried with it a tragic note.

CHAPTER XXIII

SIR GEORGE NARBOROUGH raised his eyebrows when he received a little note from Christine asking him to meet her the next day at the office in the City. He had, of course, intended calling early at Mrs. Dudworth's, but this note addressed from Bedford Square enlightened him that Christine was not with her cousin.

At the same time that she despatched her note to Sir George, Christine wrote a few words to Margaret Dudworth, begging her to come also, if possible, to the City.

Her third letter was directed to James Dancroft. She informed him that she would be at the office in the afternoon, and that it might be possible that she might wish to speak to him. She hoped, therefore, that it would not be inconvenient if he held himself at her disposal during the hours of three and five.

Sir George gathered together various papers connected with the matters he had been busy with, and he took also a case of old-fashioned jewellery, which his mother had given into his hands the last time he had seen her, desiring that he should present this gift to his future wife.

It did not put him in a good temper to find himself kept waiting in one of the rooms of the office when he reached the city. He had an irritated presentiment that something disagreeable was about to happen, and this presentiment became a conviction when the door opened at last and Christine and Mrs. Dudworth entered.

It was not the girl's white face and intensity of expression which forced this conviction home to him; it was the look in the other woman's eyes, the nervous affectionate way in which she clung to Christine. Besides this, there was an atmosphere of preparation which the young man resented.

He advanced boldly to Christine, and stooping down, was about to kiss her when she drew back.

Mrs. Dudworth saw the frown contracting Sir George's brows and hastened to the rescue.

"Christine has something to tell you, George," she said, "something which she feels must be told you without any further delay. That is why she has brought you here."

Sir George looked from one woman to the other.

"Is it something which has just occurred?" he asked, "or is it something which has reference to Christine's strange demeanour all through these many months."

"It is a matter which came to Christine's knowledge at the time of her father's death," Mrs. Dudworth answered.

Sir George turned to the girl.

"You have been a long time coming to the point," he said. "Of course, I have known perfectly well that there has been something very

unpleasant working in the background of your life, and I confess that I have been very much surprised that I have not received your confidence before now. Good God! surely if anybody ought to know what is passing with you I am that person; yet how have you treated me? It has been evasion from the very beginning, subterfuge and even trickery. Since we are coming to an explanation of a sort, I must speak out. I consider I have been very badly treated."

Mrs. Dudworth trembled a little. She was quivering still with the agitation which Christine's story had produced. This sharp attack seemed to her not only unkind, but ill-advised.

Glancing at Christine, however, she was surprised to see that the girl was looking steadily at Sir George, that instead of shrinking away from his anger, Christine was prepared to meet it. Whilst she waited, Christine spoke:

"I do not deny your right to reproach me, yet you have always known that the remedy has lain in your own hands."

Sir George flushed hotly.

"Do not quibble with me, Christine," he said. "I realize perfectly well now that you desire for some peculiar reason to change the arrangement for our marriage, and this although you know it was your father's earnest wish that you should be my wife. Well, before we go any further, I want you to understand that I am not a man to be played with in this manner. No matter what you are going to tell me, I do not intend to have the position between us altered. Please, understand

that once and for all. You are promised to me in marriage, and I claim the fulfilment of that promise."

At that moment the door opened and James Dancroft appeared. Just for an instant, as he saw the three standing, he drew back; then he entered and closed the door behind him.

"You sent for me?" he said to Christine in a low voice.

Christine said:

"Yes. I want you to listen to what I have to say."

The two men looked into each other's eyes and burning swords were unsheathed and crossed, as it were, in that glance. A mutual hatred, a mutual contempt and a mutual arrogance possessed them. Then Christine began to speak, and with a sneer Narborough ceased to look at Dancroft, and gave all his attention to the girl. But Dancroft turned his head away; he could not look at her in this moment.

CHAPTER XXIV

QUIETLY, without emotion, almost mechanically, Christine Fielding told that old sorrowful story which had come to her knowledge in so cruel a fashion.

Mrs. Dudworth had moved closer to her to give her tangible protection, but Christine showed no sign of weakness. The months of suffering which she had endured had prepared her for this supreme moment.

Sir George Narborough stood and listened with his eyes downcast. From his expression it was practically impossible to gather what was passing in his mind. The other man hovering in the background felt as if his very heart were being torn out of him as he listened to that quiet, low voice, as he realized at what a cost Christine was making this confession of her father's wrong-doing; and there came upon him a wave of acute self-reproach as he listened, although at the same time his heart leaped at the very suggestion that she was acting now as he had counselled her to act, that in this very recital she showed to him, not merely justice, but the respect, the obedience she would have shown to a trusted friend.

There was a pause when Christine finished speaking; then Sir George spoke.

"You have, of course, satisfied yourself as to the reliability of this—this accusation?"

Christine said "Yes," and then she drew from a bag she carried the confession which Henry Fielding had written and signed the year before, and the letter he had left for her when he had started to go to London.

"There are other facts," she said, "which can almost be counted upon as proofs, but here you have the one of importance, the testimony to the truth of what I have just told you."

Sir George took the papers and read them through deliberately.

Margaret Dudworth had sat down and she was watching him with an eagerness of which she was hardly conscious.

He did not speak immediately, but as he folded the papers and gave them back to Christine, he said:

"I deplore with all my heart the fact that you should have kept this from me, and I deplore this, not so much from a personal point of view, as from the unhappy one that you have been called upon to face extraordinary and hurtful difficulties, that you have exposed yourself to unnecessary humiliation and mental suffering. Had you had someone to act for you, I think it can be pretty safely declared that the position of affairs would be very different to what it is now. However, it is never too late to make a change! You have realized at last that it is your duty to take me into your confidence,

just as it is my duty to serve you; that being so, I trust that the future will be different in every respect from the past of these last few months. It will be my business to go into all the arrangements that you have made, my business to study your interest in every possible way."

The other man had fixed his eyes on Christine, and he saw the colour come and go in her face; he saw that she winced at the arrogance of Sir George's tone, then he saw an element of strength pass into her expression as she answered Narborough's speech.

"What has been done," she said, "will remain. I have summoned Mr. Dancroft here, I have broken my vow of silence only because I owe a duty to both of you—to Mr. Dancroft as his father's son, to you as the man I have promised to marry."

Sir George smiled. It was a curious smile. He approached her, and taking her hand, he lifted it to his lips.

"As your future husband," he said, "I now demand that you leave all this in my hands. I fancy Mr. Dancroft and myself will soon come to a good understanding."

And here Dancroft spoke.

"I do not recognize your right," he said roughly, "to deal with me or with those belonging to me. Though you are to be Miss Fielding's husband, I really have nothing to do with you. This is a matter which must be settled between Christine Fielding and my mother."

His tone was purposely hard, his manner purposely aggressive.

Sir George vouchsafed him no notice whatever. He spoke again to Christine.

"You will let me know your wishes; I will see that they are carried out; at least, I will see that everything is done which is necessary," he said, "and first and foremost, I am going to protect you. Perhaps you are scarcely conscious of the shocking effect that this business has made upon you. It makes my blood boil when I realize what you must have gone through, what indignities you must have suffered, how shamefully you must have been abused. But this was inevitable, my dear child, when you give yourself into the hands of such people; when you permit yourself to accept such incredulous statements without the most rigid inquiries. You have produced what you consider overwhelming proof that what you have just told me is the truth. I laugh at this proof, and I tell you now quite frankly that I consider you have been the victim of a set of impostors."

Margaret Dudworth got up quickly.

"George!" she said in an involuntary way.

But Sir George only laughed—an unpleasant, scornful laugh.

"If these words offend Mr. Dancroft," he said, "he has the alternative in his hands."

But Dancroft only smiled and then he spoke to Christine.

"You asked me to come," he said. "Do you wish me to stay?"

And Christine Fielding said "No" with such a curious sound in her voice that Narborough looked

quickly at her and flushed with anger as he did so.

He was, indeed, quivering with rage. The story Christine had given him had fallen upon him like a weighty blow. Now and again, in these past months, he had stopped to ask himself questions about Henry Fielding and to wonder if the curious change in Christine might not have its rise in some other cause than overwhelming grief. But never had he imagined such a revelation as this. Though he chose to spurn that confession, and to make open declaration that he regarded the Dancrofts as impostors, he knew in his heart of hearts that this thing was founded on fact, and that Henry Fielding's confession could not be set aside so lightly. The mere suggestion that there should be others with such a hold on the girl was not only objectionable, it was alarming. The great attraction about Christine to George Narborough had been the conviction that she stood alone; that no one had a right to share with her. This, indeed, had been to a man so conventionally framed, the one compensating side of her isolated position; but the admittance of this claim threatened to put an end to this. It not only exposed Christine to all sorts of indignities, it threatened her future and signified to himself an overwhelming disappointment. Nevertheless, he had no intention of giving voice to these feelings, neither had he the least intention of relinquishing his hold on the girl. Indeed, as he looked at her, and as he felt the strenuous personality of the man whom he had just insulted, there came to Sir George a wild,

jealous suggestion that were he to withdraw, this fellow might possibly obtain all he set aside; and though, in truth, he was far away from feeling even a pretence of sentiment for Christine Fielding at this moment, there came to him an angry resolution to tighten the bond between them, to get into his hands altogether the control of this girl, who had already made him suffer so sharply through his vanity, who from the very beginning had set her will against his.

There was a long silence after Dancroft had left the room, and it was Sir George who broke this silence.

"Now that at last you have been frank with me," he said, "you must recognize that I shall enter more intimately into your movements. I have the very greatest objection to your returning to Hunston Manor whilst these people are there. Your proper place is with Peggy, or with my mother, till we are married." Then he turned to Mrs. Dudworth: "Now you see, Peggy," he said, "how right I was in my instinctive objection to your showing hospitality to Miss Dancroft."

"I am afraid I do not follow you, George," Mrs. Dudworth answered him a little coldly. "At any rate, I am mistress of my own actions."

Sir George began to pace to and fro.

"The thing is preposterous," he said. "The whole situation unpardonably objectionable! This matter should have been dealt with with an iron hand. By permitting these people to establish themselves in Christine's home, of course their claim was recognized, whereas it should have been fought strenuously. If this had been taken into a

court of law, they would soon have been taught a lesson. Of course, there may have been some little transaction in old days which was not quite aboveboard, but this is a very common occurrence in the life of business men. As for this so-called confession, Mr. Fielding was undoubtedly in very bad health when he wrote it; this fellow must have bullied him. I am convinced if the matter had come into his hands a few years earlier he would have soon settled it."

"When you speak like that," said Christine, almost calmly, "you prove to me how widely we differ in sentiment. My father would have settled this, I know that, but not in the way you suggest. Now that I know so much, it is an anguish to me to realize what that last hour of his life must have meant to him. You think only of the money; there are other things in life more precious than money." Then, not quite so distinctly, she said: "I—I beg to release you from your engagement to me. I prefer to live my life alone!"

But Sir George struck the table violently with his hand.

"No!" he said; and again: "No; I refuse to be dismissed. You have acted abominably with me—you have shown me no consideration. Now I take my stand—you belong to me by right of promise, by right of your father's will in this matter. If you refuse to marry me I shall make the matter a public one!"

"George!" Mrs. Dudworth said protestingly for the second time.

Christine said nothing. The angry man paced

on and on. The silence, however, seemed to calm him. The look on the girl's face warned him that he had gone just a little too far. He approached her and spoke very quietly.

"If I have hurt you, I ask your forgiveness; but you don't know how you have tried me, Christine. It maddens me to realize that you have kept me so resolutely out of this matter. It is because I care for you so much—so very, very much, that I am furious when I think of all you have gone through. I will do anything you wish—work in with you any way you will if only you will give me your confidence."

He spoke as though he were absolutely in earnest, and just for the moment he was. The mere suggestion that he might lose all that was just within his grasp alarmed him. He stood pledged to the world now as the prospective master of millions. He had been so sure of his position that he had practically drawn on these millions already. To have the engagement broken would be a serious and a humiliating matter for him. Moreover, that curious element of angry jealousy was working in his heart; it might be ridiculous, still, he was not so sure that the power of this man, who had just left them, might not prevail over his own were the chance given him; and George Narborough had no intention of stepping on one side to allow his enemy so easy a triumph.

Mrs. Dudworth paused a moment and then rose and went softly away.

As she went Sir George put his arms about Christine and kissed her.

"Why will you not turn to me?" he asked her in a tender voice. "Why are you always struggling against me? You know you have not treated me well, dearest."

Just for an instant the girl leaned against him and shut her eyes. That tender note touched her, and she was yearning so much for rest, for comfort; above all, for comprehensive sympathy.

"It is because I have felt that this would be harmful to you," she said in a low voice, "that I have wished to give you back your freedom. You—you are so proud. There are no secrets in your family history."

"That is a matter," said George Narborough, reverting a little to his usual manner, "which I settled long ago. Family, pride, what are they when it is a question of love?"

Christine shivered just a little and took herself away from him.

"If—if," she said unsteadily, "if we are to go on as we were, if nothing is to be changed, then I look to you to work with me. Just now you said this ought to have been taken into a court of law. Don't you understand that the one aim of my heart is to keep this away from my father's reputation? I know that if he had lived he would have made atonement. With my own ears I heard him say that restitution should be made, a full and complete restitution. And that is what I want to do, George, to make even the wrong and yet to stand and protect my father's memory."

"And have you counted the cost?" asked Narborough. "What will satisfy these people?

Already you must have given them an enormous amount, and yet they still talk of their claim being settled!"

"I must give them what they ask," Christine said in a low voice. Then after a moment's pause she added: "It really now remains a matter to be settled between Mrs. Dancroft and myself. Her daughter will be content if a certain amount of money is made over to her. Mr. Dancroft wants nothing more than he has now, which is a place of trust here in the firm, a place which will give him scope to work and make a future for himself."

"Oh!" said Narborough with a cold smile. "You have got so far as to know what his wishes are, even to have studied them! Well, now, dearest, you must study mine. You must drive a bargain with the old woman. The girl will be satisfied, I take it, very easily, but that old creature will be a very different matter. Let me deal with her?"

But Christine shook her head.

"No," she said. "No, I must do this; but I promise you I will decide nothing without letting you know."

"It must be done quickly," said the young man, "for I am impatient to take you away from all this, to have you to myself, to let you see how pleasant life can still be. Will it tire you too much to come and see the house I have told you about this afternoon? And I was going to suggest running you down to Southampton to-morrow to have a look at the yacht. I long to have you on board,

to carry you off where no one shall worry you and nothing shall sadden you."

"I will see the yacht and the house another time," Christine said. "Please don't be angry with me, but I should like to go back to Hunston to-night. I won't wait any longer, I will come to terms with Mrs. Dancroft at once."

Sir George paused an instant, and then said:

"Good. Perhaps this is the best, and I will come down the moment you want me. But remember, do not let yourself be bullied. This old woman wants to make you suffer. She is too old to care for money or what money can give. Her satisfaction will be in keeping you in suspense as to what she means to do. Shall I take you to Peggy? I expect she is waiting in the carriage."

"No," said Christine. "I am not coming away just yet. There are one or two matters I have to see to here. Please tell Peggy I will call and say good-bye to her before I go back to-night."

Sir George took her again in his arms, and once again he kissed her, and once again he said tender and caressing things to her. But the words had no meaning for Christine and the kisses hurt her.

As the door closed on him and she was alone, she sat down and covered her face with her hands. She felt his mastership, but felt it without resentment. Her dominant sensation was one of anguish in the realization that she had been forced to lay bare the story of her father's wrong-doing before this man. She felt that he despised the man whom she loved, whose memory she cherished more tenderly, if

possible, each hour that came. She winced as she remembered Narborough's cruel insolence. She dreaded the future.

In this moment she found herself crying out against the burden she carried. She felt that if she could have stood alone, rid of all her money, there would almost be a joy in the mere fact of living. She was so worn out with the remembrance of this wealth, of the responsibility of it, of all the sordid and mean sentiments which it seemed to rouse. There came to her recollection now of how at times her father had come to Hanston, and how his one prayer had been for forgetfulness of the life he left behind in the City. In those days Christine had not understood, but now the meaning was so clear to her.

She, too, craved for peace. The tension was too great, the suffering intolerable. Bending forward, she broke into tears.

CHAPTER XXV

SHE wept unrestrainedly, rocking herself to and fro in this moment of heart anguish, and she was wholly unconscious that someone had entered the room, and was standing in the shadows watching her, waiting till this passion of grief and trouble should die down.

In a little while the tears were spent, and Christine lay back exhausted in the chair, her breath coming in painful and catching fashion.

Dancroft waited still a moment longer, and then he came forward, and as she heard him approach, with a start the girl sat forward. Then, as she saw him she bent her head as though to hide her tear-stained face.

"I have come with a message," James Dancroft said, in his abrupt way. "Mrs. Dudworth wishes you to know that she has gone home and will wait for you there. I thought I would bring you this message myself."

"Thank you," Christine said.

There was a pause. She rose and pulled down her veil with trembling hands, and the man watched her with sorrowful and yet passionate eyes. Suddenly he said:

"I've something else to say! I want to tell you that I think you are the bravest, the most honourable creature in the world! There's more I want to say: will you listen?"

Christine did not answer immediately; then she said in her voice so broken with weeping:

"Yes, if I can."

"I want to ask you to let me serve you in some way, to let me deal with my mother. That man said a few truths just now, though he was far more concerned in striking at me than in considering you. You *have* been shamefully used, you *have* been humiliated and even tortured! I—I want you to forgive me and show your forgiveness by letting me help you. I have a certain power with my mother; if you will let me know your wishes, I'll undertake to try and counsel her to fall in with you."

"Can you give me peace of mind?" asked Christine, not bitterly, but wearily. "Can you assure me that what is so dear to me will remain safe?"

"Yes, that I will promise you," said James Dancroft. "If only you will forgive me."

"What have I to forgive?" asked Christine. "It is true that I have suffered, as perhaps even you cannot understand; still, why should I blame you? Why should I hate you? You had your father in your mind—you had your life seared with the bitterest remembrance. Should I hate you because you wanted to work for your father's sake when I—I live only to work for mine?"

"Ah!" said James Dancroft. The exclama-

tion escaped his lips almost with a sound of happiness. He approached a little nearer. "Then since you do not hate me," he said, "give me your hand in fellowship, let me serve you while I can; and listen to me, Christine Fielding: all the wrong that your father did exists for me no longer—your beautiful courage and devotion have wiped it out of existence. It will not be possible for me to do much for you; your life is planned out, your future belongs to another; yet I can help you, and I will. It—it would mean something like happiness to me," the man said a little hoarsely, "if I could feel that I had put an end to such tears as you have just wept, that I could put an end to fear and doubt. I will deal with my mother. I shall not forget my duty to her, but this has gone far enough; it must end, and end quickly."

His hand was outstretched, that brown, sinewy hand, the hand of a strong man, and with a little hesitation Christine put out her hand and rested it in his. As he gripped her small fingers there ran to her heart a current so thrilling, so strong, so wonderful, it seemed to bring sunshine suddenly before her tired eyes; it seemed to surround her with an incomprehensible sense of ecstasy.

"Call me friend," said Dancroft. "Tell me that you trust me."

And like a child she obeyed him.

"My friend," she said, "my friend whom I trust."

Dancroft's face was illumined. Just for an instant his eyes met and held Christine's, then he stooped over her hand as though he would

have kissed it, but his lips did not touch it. Remembrance came to him. Remembrance of George Narborough. Gently he released the hand and stood back.

"You are going down to Hunston to-night," he said. "I will try and get away to-morrow. My mother expects me to-morrow and I think I can promise you one thing, and that is that she shall live apart from you. We'll talk over Anne's business another time."

Then he turned and went away abruptly. Christine watched him go with a thrill at her heart.

His offer of friendship was very sweet to her; his words about her father most beautiful. The knowledge that he could forget—that the rancour, the hatred, the blighting sense of his wrong had been swept away, and by her doing, brought to Christine a consolation which she hardly dared realize.

It seemed to her in this moment as she stood alone in the tranquillity of the little room where her father had worked so often and, as she assured herself now, must have sorrowed so deeply, that the spirit of that father was with her now, and that the agony of remorse which must have laid heavily on Henry Fielding the night of his death, must have been lifted by this exchange of sympathy between his own loved child and the son of the man whom he had wronged. At least she had been given assurance that the duty she had set herself so proudly had not been undertaken in vain, and that her sincerity and straightforward-

ness had carried conviction to those who had approached her as enemies ready to assail and to hurt. And it was in the realization of such knowledge that Christine found a glimpse of real and rare happiness.

CHAPTER XXVI

CHRISTINE allowed herself to be persuaded to stay and dine quietly that evening with her cousin. She did not see Anne Dancroft who, it appeared, had an engagement with Mrs. Coniston. Scarcely a day had passed without some such engagement.

Enid Coniston seemed resolved on fostering her acquaintance with Miss Dancroft into a warm and intimate friendship. She quickly discovered that Anne was of a generous disposition, and though, of course, she was not acquainted with the run of affairs, yet she shrewdly guessed that the intimate association with Christine Fielding could not but have a highly satisfactory financial significance to this other girl.

And it was natural enough that Anne Dancroft should drift into friendship with a woman as young as herself, and so different to Mrs. Dudworth. Life at Mrs. Coniston's little house was vastly more amusing to Anne. She felt considerably out of her element with the class of people whom she met at Margaret Dudworth's house, whereas with Mrs. Coniston's friends she got along famously. This was especially the case with Enid Coniston's

brother-in-law, a young doctor who had a busy and unlucrative practice in the East End.

"I mean to bring Jack and Anne Dancroft together," Mrs. Coniston had said to her husband in the beginning, and Dr. Coniston had laughed at this.

"Oh! Jack won't be half smart enough for Miss Dancroft," he had answered.

But his wife's discernment was greater than his own in this case, for Anne Dancroft was immediately attracted by the cheery wit and enterprising spirit of Jack Coniston. Then, too, she considered him handsome, and when Mrs. Coniston had taken her down to see the tiny little house where he lived and worked, a sentimental feeling began to dawn in Anne's mind. Something of this Mrs. Dudworth said to Christine as they sat at dinner. She was anxious to speak of every subject except that which had reference to George Narborough.

"You remember Jack Coniston, don't you, Christine?" she asked.

"Perfectly," said Christine. "He used to come to Hunston to play tennis. I always imagined that he was in love with Enid."

"Oh! Enid never intended to marry a struggling man. I am afraid she is not very satisfied with her lot as it is, although her husband is a clever man and is doing extremely well. I feel a little anxious about Miss Dancroft. I wonder whether I ought to let her brother know what is passing? He is such a straightforward, uncompromising sort of individual, I believe I am a little afraid of him."

A warm rush of colour came to Christine's face,

but she said nothing. It was at all times difficult to her to speak James Dancroft's name, to-night more especially so. She turned the subject of the conversation to Mrs. Dudworth's recent visit to Ireland, and then, of course, they talked about Roger, who wrote now and then affectionate and very amusing letters to Christine. There was not really much opportunity for confidence, for Christine had to leave to catch the train back to the country almost before the dinner was ended.

Dr. Brathmore was at Hunston when she arrived. He had heard she was expected and waited to see her. He had news to give her of Mrs. Dancroft; important and grave news.

"She is very ill," he said, "very ill, and the most difficult person I have ever come across. I have written to her son: I did not feel satisfied; we must have other advice. It grieves me, Christine dear, that you have to come back to find this fresh trouble. But you must try and get away from it. Why not come to us?

But the girl shook her head.

"I would rather stay here," she said, in a low voice. "I could not go, especially if Mrs. Dancroft is so ill."

"I have insisted on sending in a nurse," said Dr. Brathmore. "That old woman that she has about her has no knowledge of sick nursing. Indeed, I shall advise Mr. Dancroft to get rid of her altogether. She is a malevolent sort of old creature, and does his mother no good."

Christine went up to her room after the doctor had gone, but she could not stay there. She was

restless, and every now and then remembrance would come to her—a strange, a sweet remembrance, and she would feel herself transplanted back to her father's old room in the office; she would feel her hand clasped in a strong, warm clasp, and her eyes would meet two dark, passionate eyes which seemed to draw her very soul from her. A little while ago there had been no happiness for her in her old home, dear as it was; but this night, in some strange way, the blight which had hung upon her for so long seemed to have been swept away. It gave her even a sense of gladness to realize that the old woman who had made her suffer so much, was housed in such comfort, that everything that money and science could do would be forthcoming to alleviate her sufferings, that the mother of the man whom she called her friend was under her roof, almost in her care.

The nurse whom Dr. Brathmore had sent in proved a pleasant woman, and there was a very tangible comfort in the knowledge that she was in the house. It was as though the promise which Dancroft had given to her to put an end to all which had been so wretched had actually commenced. Assuredly the realization that he was working with her and not against her made everything brighter and easier to bear.

The morning when it came brought her a long letter from Sir George. He wrote with a good many endearments planning out their movements. The question of the house in town he told her might be put on one side, but the purchase of the yacht would have to be completed immediately.

"You must not let me urge you to do anything you do not want," Sir George wrote; "but I cling very much to the thought of taking you away in this yacht. Of course, the price is big, but I have gone into the matter most thoroughly and have convinced myself that it will be money thoroughly well spent. How I wish that it were in my power to buy this and give it to you, my dear, as a wedding gift! I have so little to give you except love and devotion and a few old jewels. These, by the way, I took with me yesterday to the office, but I did not think it was a good moment to bring them to your notice, so I will keep them till we are married; then, if you wish, you can have them reset. Let me know your decision about the yacht as soon as possible, as Markham, who owns it, is off to America now immediately."

Christine sat down and wrote a telegram. It was to Narborough, desiring him to close at once for the purchase of the yacht. Then she wrote to her lawyers instructing them that the purchase of this yacht should be made in the form of a gift.

"I wish," she wrote, "to make a present of this to Sir George Narborough. I leave it in your hands to arrange everything for me. Please understand the yacht is to be his property absolutely."

This letter she sent by hand to London so that there should be no delay; and when she had answered many other letters, she took her book and went out into the grounds.

It was very fresh and beautiful out under the trees. The girl rested in the comfortable chair. Her eyes were not closed, yet she seemed to sleep.

The most delicious feeling encompassed her about. She was like one at peace—like someone who, having been unduly wearied, was resting at last.

From this spell of tranquillity, however, Christine was rudely roused.

Dancroft came swiftly through the trees in search of her. His face looked haggard, and his eyes were miserable. He gave her no greeting, he did not touch her hand. He sank into a chair and covered his face.

A grim shadow fell suddenly upon Christine. The beauty of the scene was blotted out for an instant—that warm, that heavenly sense of peace went from her utterly.

"Your mother?"

He did not answer her immediately; then he looked up.

"I promised you more than I can fulfil. It is not possible to take my mother away from here. She must share your home a while longer."

"I am quite content," said Christine in a low voice, "content to let things be as they are. Please don't think about me. Tell me about your mother."

"I knew she was very ill; I have seen it coming for a long time," the man answered; "that was why I insisted upon Brathmore seeing her. He wrote me yesterday that he found her in a worse condition than he had at first imagined. He asked to have another opinion; he named the man he wanted. I brought that man with me; they are together with her now. My poor mother!"

She winced at the tone in his voice. She seemed

at once to recognize that there was remorse working in his heart, and almost immediately this was confirmed.

"I have been thinking of her hardly," Dancroft said. "The last time we were together she reproached me. She said that I—I was forgetting, and it is true. I have forgotten her! I have put her on one side. I have remembered nothing of the old terrible life, my father's miserable death, my mother's intolerable privations, my own degraded existence. All this I have forgotten, and this—this is my punishment."

The girl looked at him with dilated eyes.

"Oh! don't," she said, "don't say such things! It would never be possible for you to forget. I—I told you yesterday that there was a bond between us: the bond of your love for your father, of my love for mine."

"You must forget what I said yesterday," the man said roughly. "I feel as if I had been a traitor, and now perhaps my mother will die and I shall have helped to kill her!"

Christine Fielding rose out of her chair.

"Mr. Dancroft," she said, "I want you to know that I—I understand better than you can tell me just what you feel. And if this is to be the outcome of our compact of friendship, then let us break that compact, let us go back and stand where we stood. Your mother must be your first consideration."

She turned so that he should not hear the break in her voice, and went quickly back to the house.

Dancroft rose and looked after her. The meaning

of her last speech did not come to him clearly at first; then he gave a little cry and pressed his hands to his brow.

The news of his mother's serious condition had swept calmness from him, and with it had brought back all the old feeling, the old misery, the old memories; but as he looked after Christine, as he felt the void her going left, the new passion struggled with the old.

"Don't leave me," he said, hoarsely, "don't leave me; I have need of you, friend."

But Christine had gone too far. She vanished from his sight at that moment, and with a cry he sat down again and shut out the beauty of the world. It was here that Dr. Brathmore found him.

"Will you come back to the house?" he said. "Sir Thomas would like to speak with you."

The young man got up and reeled a little as he stood; and Dr. Brathmore put out his hand and gripped him by the arm.

"Lean on me," he said gently. "I am afraid I gave you a blow, I ought to have written more carefully."

They walked together till they were close to the house, then James Dancroft took his arm away from the other man's hold and walked alone.

Casson was waiting for them in the hall, and he informed them that the other doctor was in the library.

As they passed down the corridor Christine came into the hall. She had entered the house

through one of the long open windows, and was about to mount the stairs when Casson spoke.

"Do you intend to offer Sir Thomas Curtis luncheon, Miss Christine?" he asked. "He is in now with Mr. Dancroft and Dr. Brathmore."

Christine put her hand to her head. She felt dazed. That brief interview with James Dancroft had thrust her back into a worse misery than before. The man's self-reproach appealed to that which was most tender and precious in Christine's own heart. She did not blame him for his revulsion of feeling where she was concerned; she pitied him, and she pitied herself, for she felt in this moment that in taking back his friendship she had lost a great gift."

"Certainly," she said in a low voice. "I—I will wait here and see Sir Thomas myself."

She stood in the wide open doorway counting the moments as they passed. How long they were! A sensation of suspense possessed her. There was not the poignant personal note in this suspense, and yet the man's heart had been laid open before her and the knowledge that he was suffering for a cause which was so comprehensible to her, which called to all her sympathy, gave her also the reflection of his suffering.

When at last she heard voices, she turned. Her face was very white.

Dr. Brathmore presented Sir Thomas Curtis to her and then began immediately to speak of the arrangements which they had made.

"It will be necessary for Mrs. Dancroft to go to

London," he said, "to be in Sir Thomas's immediate care."

"An operation is imperative," the physician said.

And Christine's lips paled as she repeated:

"An operation!"

"To save fatigue we have decided to let our patient travel to London by motor-car. She can go at a gentle pace and will feel the journey less in that way," Dr. Brathmore said.

Christine, looking beyond them, saw in the background Dancroft standing staring out through the doorway to the gardens beyond. He wore his old sullen expression, but the fierceness had gone. In his eyes there seemed to be dread. The expression of one who suffers and cannot speak.

Christine paused, but only an instant, and then she said:

"Why should there be any journey at all? Cannot Mrs. Dancroft remain here?"

Sir Thomas knitted his brows for an instant.

"That is her wish," he said hesitatingly, "but——"

But Christine broke in quickly:

"Oh! *please* let her wishes be studied. She is not young, and I fear she must have been suffering very greatly. It would—it would grieve me very much if she had to be taken away from here, more especially when she is so ill."

Sir Thomas did not answer immediately. When he did speak he laid before Christine the advantages of a nursing home.

But Christine only reiterated her first thought.

"Unless you tell me that it is absolutely vital," she said, "and that Mrs. Dancroft cannot possibly receive the attention here that she would in a home in London, I must entreat you not to move her."

"The recovery must be slow," said Sir Thomas.

"I am sure she would recover as quickly here as in London," Miss Fielding answered.

Sir Thomas smiled.

"Well," he said, "after all, it is your house, and if you choose to have the anxiety and the trouble and the very large expense which a matter of this kind must entail, I have nothing more to say. Undoubtedly, in one respect, I am with you. Mrs. Dancroft does seem to have a very peculiar objection to leaving here. It is always advisable in such a condition as hers to study the mind as well as the body. Possibly we might do a certain amount of harm by taking her away when she so strongly desires not to go. This changes our plans, Brathmore," Sir Thomas said, turning to his colleague; "I think we had better have a little chat together."

The two doctors went out into the garden and for a moment Christine and Dancroft were alone.

Conscious that she had done something which should signify at least satisfaction to him, the girl looked at him half eagerly, half wistfully, but the words she expected were not uttered.

Instead, Dancroft walked deliberately past her, in his silence revealing the old morose antagonism. He did not follow the doctors; he stood on the steps waiting for them to return.

Christine called her butler.

"Sir Thomas cannot stay to luncheon," she said. "He wishes to get back to London as quickly as possible. And there is no train from our station for another two hours; he will motor into the town and catch the express. See that the motor is sent round as quickly as possible. And please tell Dr. Brathmore that if he wishes to speak to me I will come down again, but that, of course, he must order everything he wants without consulting me."

She walked slowly up the stairs—so slowly as to seem fatigued; and though he did not look at her, Dancroft was conscious of her every movement.

In this moment he was teaching himself the part he had to play. There must be no more pretence of fellowship or sympathy between himself and this girl. If he felt himself tempted to give voice to the passion and the tenderness which had come unasked into his heart for her, he must set before himself the memory of his father; he must look afresh on his mother's wasted face, and beyond these, equally forcible, equally separating, was there not the knowledge of Christine's position, of the bond which bound her and her future to George Narborough?

CHAPTER XXVII

SIR GEORGE lost no time in carrying out Christine's wishes with regard to the yacht. He travelled down to Southampton immediately on receipt of her telegram. On the whole he felt less disturbed than he had been.

Thinking out the question of the Dancrofts, he had come to the conclusion that a sum of money, say about fifty thousand pounds, would settle their claim once and for all. It need not be said that such a sum represented to Sir George far, far more than he considered these people ought to have; but reflection had brought to him the wisdom of not fighting, and if there was to be no fight, then it would have to be a question of a lot of money.

"And that must end it," the young man said to himself, "end it definitely. Moreover, if they take this money, that fellow Dancroft must get out of the office. We want no one with secrets harboured by the firm. He could do an incalculable lot of harm."

At Southampton Sir George lunched with the yacht owner and settled everything connected with the purchase satisfactorily. He spent an hour

or so on board the yacht, planning out certain little alterations, and on his return to the hotel paused there for half an hour before taking the train back to London.

He was comfortably ensconced in the smoking-room when a waiter brought him a little note.

It was written in pencil, and evidently in a great hurry, and was signed, "Constance."

The note informed him that Miss Knox was in the very greatest trouble. Illness had brought their tour in Brittany to an abrupt termination. Her uncle had desired to return to England, but was unable, now they had landed, to be moved. "Yesterday he seemed better," the note said, "but in the night he was alarmingly ill, and to-day his condition is serious. I hardly know what to do! By the merest chance I hear you are in the hotel; will you see me? Perhaps you can advise me how to act for the best."

Sir George went immediately to answer this note in person.

When Miss Knox came to him she was trembling. Her beauty seemed blotted out for the time. Her eyes were tear-stained, she was a picture of grief. Quite naturally (so it seemed to both of them) as Sir George took her hands, he drew her into an embrace and held her in his arms for a moment in silence.

Almost immediately, however, the woman took herself away from his hold.

"Oh! I forgot!" she said; "but it was so sweet to see you, so good of you to come!"

"You must let me help you," Narborough said.

He found himself shaken out of his usual calmness. There came to him a sensation of surprise that this should be so, also surprise that he should feel real anxiety, yet such was undoubtedly the case.

"Regard me as if I belonged to you. Trust me. I am so glad that I was here to-day. I shall stay."

His vanity could not be proof against the pleasure he evinced as he saw the woman's face light up. Here, at least, he was appreciated; here, at least, was one who belonged to him really and wholly in heart!

Constance thanked him with tears in her eyes, and did not refuse his offer.

"I shall be so glad to have you near me," she said. "I try not to think it, but I am afraid that I am going to lose dear Uncle Henry. Though we have been together such a little while, I have learnt to love him very, very much. He is so good to me! Only last night he told me of all that he had done for me. He has made me a very rich woman, and he has desired me to go to his sister, an aunt whom I have never met, who lives in South Amercia, and who is also very wealthy. But all this matters nothing to me in comparison to the loss I shall have —if—if he dies."

"You must have courage," said George Narborough, and to give her this courage he sat down, and took her hands in his and he kissed them.

They talked together for some time, and then he went to send telegrams cancelling all his immediate engagements.

His valet joined him the next day, and brought with him letters, amongst which was one from Miss Fielding's lawyers, giving him their client's instructions with regard to the yacht and forwarding him the amount of money required to complete the purchase.

Just for an instant this generous action on the part of Christine moved him. It was certainly very agreeable to feel that he possessed such a valuable property. Then, of course, he began to find fault; he considered that Christine should have acquainted him with this intention, that she should have studied his dignity. However, at this moment thought of Christine was not obtrusive.

As Miss Knox's uncle seemed a little better, he persuaded her to go with him and spend an hour on board the *Flora*.

The yacht was perfectly appointed. It had been fitted up by its recent owner for his wife, whose untimely death had really been the cause of the *Flora* changing hands.

Constance Knox was charmed with all she saw, yet the inevitable jealousy and sadness tinged her words.

"You will sail away in this," she said, "far, far away, and you will be so happy."

Sir George shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows? And perhaps I shall not sail so very far. At least, you have promised me, Constance, that before you go to strangers, should you be left alone, you will stay for a little while with my mother; that will give us the chance of seeing one another."

"A chance which we ought to avoid, at least, I ought to, if I want to have any peace of mind."

George took the girl's hand.

"Constance," he said, "do you really love me still? I know you did love me; but, well, I have not been very kind to you, and love needs kindness."

"We must not talk of this," said the woman quietly. She had grown very pale, and when she suggested that they should go back to the hotel, Sir George fell in at once with her wishes.

He stayed at Southampton a day or two, and when he left he travelled direct to Hunston.

"The yacht is all ready," he said to himself; "we really have no need to wait. The quieter the wedding, the better Christine will be pleased."

But he was restless, and all the way down in the train his mind was haunted by the vision of Constance Knox's face, by the pathetic beauty of her eyes, and by the touch of her lips, for he had kissed her many times.

Had she remained his mother's companion, the undoubted beauty which Constance possessed would never have taken such hold on him. It was the change in her circumstances which disturbed him. Unconsciously he found himself setting these two women side by side.

Miss Fielding, of course, was the wealthier of the two; but he had been astounded when Constance had told him of the amount of money which would come to her at her uncle's death.

Her elegance, the charm of her appearance,

contrasted almost disagreeably with Christine's indifference to her looks and to the shabby and unbecoming black she persisted in wearing.

He found himself peculiarly out of sympathy with his betrothed wife as he drove up to Hunston Manor. The recollection of their last meeting, of the story which she had then told, worked like poison in his thoughts. It brought before him all sorts of objectionable possibilities. If Fielding had been this class of man, who could say what might not yet be hidden in his past career? They might never be free from disclosures and possible claims. The future seemed charged with all sorts of disagreeable potentialities.

With this mood on him, he alighted and waited in the hall for Christine to come.

When they were together, he did not offer to embrace her; he just held her hand for an instant. It was Christine who spoke first.

"You have had my letter?" she asked in a very low voice.

Sir George frowned.

"I have had no letter for several days," he answered. "I have come straight here from Southampton, where I was detained," he added, "on business," a little hurriedly.

Christine said "Oh!" rather painfully, and her face flushed.

The young man looked at her just a moment, and then said:

"What was in your letter? I came here because I had not heard, because I want to bring the matter we discussed the other day to an immediate settle-

ment. You wrote to me for some particular purpose?"

Christine caught her breath; then she said, speaking hurriedly, and yet with difficulty:

"Yes; you have so often urged me to come away from here—to break with old associations—to take up new duties; and—and, I have decided that you are right. I will leave here at once; I will marry you when you wish!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE news of her mother's condition had cut short Anne Dancroft's visit to London, although her brother had kept her in ignorance of what was passing till the operation had been performed. Dr. Brathmore had tried and tried in vain to get Christine out of the house at the crucial moment, but Miss Fielding refused to be persuaded. To all Dr. Brathmore's arguments she made the same reply:

"I must stay here. Please don't worry about me. I should be wretched if I were not here just now."

When he failed to move her, Dr. Brathmore put the matter before Mr. Dancroft, who at first merely shrugged his shoulders; and then finding it imperative on him to do something, brought the matter to Christine in the most casual way.

"I don't think you had better stay here," he said. "Brathmore says it isn't good for you."

"I beg that you will not trouble about me, one way or another," Christine had answered him very coldly. "I have already informed Dr. Brathmore I intend to remain."

This was about the only direct speech she had with the young man. They seemed to have fallen back completely into the disagreeable conditions which had characterized the early stage of their acquaintance. Just at first Christine had been horribly surprised and mortified that Dancroft had not shown some appreciation for her thoughtfulness in studying his mother's wishes. But she very quickly took herself to task for being so foolish; it was evident that the man now thoroughly regretted that brief spell of sympathy with herself. And yet she could not shut away her sympathy from him. Whilst his mother was in the hands of the surgeons she felt in her own heart each pang that must have shaken his.

She herself had gone once again to that beautiful spot under the trees, and had sat there, not even pretending to read. Though there could be no suggestion of real feeling in her heart for the woman whose life might be even then hanging in the balance; though, indeed, it would have been natural enough if she had hated Mrs. Dancroft, she could not put herself outside the significance of such a vital moment. Indeed, she even tortured herself by imagining what her sufferings would have been had such an ordeal come to her father in place of James Dancroft's mother.

The news that the operation had been perfectly successful was conveyed to her by Dr. Brathmore. She did not see Dancroft that day, nor, indeed, until two days later, when his sister arrived.

There was something rather callous about Anne's

frank disappointment in being called back to the country. Nevertheless, she brought an element of life which was very welcome. Her humanity, though it was coarse-fibred, was warm and full-blooded. She showed very little concern about the invalid, but chose to make a confidant of Christine. At the same time, in her outspoken way, she brought matters to a point where her future was concerned.

"Enid Coniston wants me to go abroad with her this summer, and I think I shall go unless things change in the way I want them to change. Mother doesn't want me; she's got Bessie and all sorts of people to nurse her, and I've had my share of her company. It's everybody for themselves in this life, you know," Anne said with a little hard laugh. "I daresay I shock you, but then you must remember you've always had everything you wanted. There's never been any beastly want in your life. Money, my dear, makes all the difference."

And Christine had answered spontaneously, passionately:

"I think I have grown to hate money."

"Oh, yes," said Anne. "That's what people say when they've got too much of it. Well, I don't hate it, and I want all I can get! Look here, I'll tell you the truth. I've met a man I mean to marry. I never cared for anybody as I care for him. There's always been something between mother and me. Her heart was wrapped up in my sister who died, and in the other two boys she lost. I should have got fond of Jim if I'd seen anything of him, but we've never been together.

Though his life was not a very rosy one, still, it wasn't miserable like ours. He moved about and saw life. It wasn't living from hand to mouth, having one's feelings burnt out with the hatred and the determination to be revenged, which, I believe, are the only things which have kept my mother alive all this time. Yes, I mean to marry, and I—I shall do it soon, just as soon as I know what you and Jim have decided."

They were sitting in the low-roofed, sweet-smelling drawing-room. The wide windows were flung open, the lamps were not lit. Outside the moon was shining softly.

"There is no need to wait for your brother," Christine Fielding said. "This can be settled between you and me. Tell me what you want. I will give it you."

Anne's heart beat wildly. She was not avaricious, and yet her views had been a good deal broadened by constant contact with so practical a person as Mrs. Coniston.

"You mean what you say?" she asked abruptly. "You won't go back on it?"

Christine said:

"No."

And then Anne, with a little thrill at her heart, stated a sum she had fixed in her own mind.

"You see," she said, "Jack is only earning very little now; but he is very clever, he is bound to get on. He'll move into the West End and make a name for himself later on, but we must have something to live on till all that happens. I'm not like Enid; she wants grand people and

palaces; I only want a home and the man I care about, and, more than that, I want to be able to help him."

Christine came towards her. In the dusk she looked wraith-like in her white clinging gown.

"Thank God!" she said, "it is in my power to give you these things. To-morrow I will write to my lawyers, and in a very little while you shall be mistress of your own money. But I want something in return for this, Anne."

"Something from me?" queried Anne surprisedly.

"Yes—I—I want a promise. I want you to try and forget if you can the reason that brought us together. I want——" The rest of the sentence was not spoken.

"Oh! if that's all you want it's easily given," said Anne Dancroft promptly, "because I've never really felt hard on you or on your father. All that happened with my father was so very long ago; I knew nothing of it. And look here, I'll tell you one thing more. I'll do my best to make things go a little better for you, if I can, with mother and Jim."

"Don't attempt the impossible," Christine answered bitterly. "Whatever I do, I know I shall fail to be properly understood by your mother or your brother. But be happy; you don't know how much you will do for me if you let me know that you are happy!"

The day following she put in hand the necessary work to make over to Anne Dancroft the sum of money she had asked for, and that same day Anne

had rushed back to London again. She had left a little note for her brother, who had been absent on her departure, and late that evening Dancroft sought Christine.

She was in the grounds walking slowly under the trees.

His manner was brusque to rudeness. He attacked her boldly.

"You have broken faith with me," he said. "I told you to do nothing for Anne till we had discussed the matter."

"I cannot allow myself to be dictated to in everything, Mr. Dancroft," said Christine, drawing back from him. She trembled as she spoke, but not with fear. His roughness hurt her far more now than it had done in the beginning.

To this he answered her:

"I have the right to dictate. Anne has lost her head. Do you think she is fit to have the control of money and to throw it away on the first ne'er-do-well who takes her fancy?"

"With what happens afterwards," Christine said, "I have nothing to do. I have grown tired of waiting for you to come to some decision. In every way possible I have studied your mother's wishes and your own. There comes a time when one cannot endure any longer. Your sister is the only one who has shown me consideration."

"Having bought her," said Dancroft with a sneer, "she is disposed of, you mean? Well, you cannot buy us so easily."

The girl moved away from him. The silver light of the young moon touched her tenderly. She had

never looked sweeter or fairer, and the passion in the man's heart swelled almost dangerously strong, almost beyond his self-control. She was so very close to him. They were alone, with only the moon above, the trees around them; the wide, open, beautiful world of the night was theirs for this moment. If he yielded to that passion he could for a moment or two perhaps forget that she belonged to another man, that she was for ever set apart from himself.

She stood silent a long time, and the yearning to take her into his arms became unbearable. Then she turned.

"Listen," she said. "I have come to the decision that I will not buy you. I will make no bargain with you. I—I will give up all I have to you; then perhaps you will be satisfied."

He laughed harshly and repeated her words.

"You will give up all? Think well what you are saying! You will give up all?" he laughed again harshly and with a sneer in it. "And then what will become of you? What will you do? Where will you go? To this man who loves you so much, this man who is to be your husband?"

"Yes," said Christine, as steadily and as bravely as she could. "I will marry at once. I—I realize that I can't stay by myself any longer; I must have someone to take care of me—someone to remind me of what I lost when my father died. Please let your mother know that she is done with me; that I am making my preparations to leave here, and that now she can have all she wants—*all!*"

She went past him swiftly as she said this, but he stood in her path.

"You are mad," he said, "mad! Do you suppose he will let you do what you want to do? Do you suppose you'll ever get care or common understanding from a man like that?"

She looked up at him and just for a moment words would not come; then she said:

"I will not discuss this with you. You have hated me and harmed me, and done all you could to humiliate me, and now—it is over. You've driven me away from my home and you can be satisfied. In the future you will have a man to deal with, not me. Please let me pass."

He moved obediently and she went hurriedly, and broke into a run, as though she feared that he might follow her. But Dancroft did not move, he let her go. He looked about him, on the wide space around him, and he felt the unutterable loneliness of it. Then the iron of a great anguish entered into his soul. Flinging himself full length on the grass, he buried his face on his arms, and he mourned as one mourns who weeps for the dead.

And that same night Christine wrote to George Narborough, wrote with a passion and abandonment of which she was hardly conscious. In this wildness she set down her need, of her longing for that love which he had protested so often. She did not stop to measure her words, she only let him see that she had reached the limit of her endurance, that she must be free from the burden she had taken on her shoulders, even though it cost her all she had.

And after this letter was gone, she counted the hours till the answer should come; and two days went by, and nothing came, and then whilst she sat still waiting they brought her the information that Sir George Narborough had come.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE news went through the household that Miss Christine was about to go away. It was generally surmised, though nobody knew anything for certain, that this decision must have been dictated to her by Sir George Narborough.

In like fashion it was generally supposed that the marriage would take place even sooner than had been arranged. Mr. Dancroft had gone back to his work the moment that his mother was pronounced out of danger. But he travelled down to Hunston Manor each day to assure himself personally that all was well.

It was Casson who announced to him the fact that Miss Fielding would be leaving Hunston in a week's time.

"She desired me to say, sir, that she was anxious to take away some few things which belonged to the master and to her mother. Perhaps you would like to speak to her."

But Dancroft said "No!" so savagely that the butler looked at him with uplifted eyebrows. This rudeness surprised him; indeed, of late he had found himself drifting into something like admira-

tion for the young man who bore himself so well in a trying position.

James Dancroft possessed the power of impressing others. He was very simple, and yet he had dignity; he could show consideration, and yet give orders.

His mother, and, in a less degree, his sister, had managed to make themselves thoroughly detested by the household at Hunston Manor, but none of the servants disliked Mr. Dancroft. His attitude towards Miss Fielding had always been outwardly marked with great consideration, so it had seemed to Casson, hence his manner now was surprisingly unpleasant.

There was no chance of Miss Fielding and Mr. Dancroft meeting even casually, for since she had taken her decision Christine had kept to her own room; a state of things fostered by her maid, who found an opportunity to write to Mrs. Dudworth (once more in Ireland for a short visit), and give her opinion as to her young mistress's condition of health.

As a matter of fact, Christine hardly realized how ill she was in these days. She was beset only with a feverish anxiety to be away from Hunston, away from all which was so hurtful, so sorrowful.

Vaguely she had realized that there had been something lacking in Sir George's manner, that he had discussed their plans in a half-hearted way; that the eagerness which had prompted him to propose an immediate marriage all through the past year had been singularly lacking in this their latest meeting. But she had been wrought

up to such a pitch of nervous tension, she was so shaken by recent events, that nothing had been very clear to her. And after he had gone and she had dragged herself up to her room, there had come upon Christine only one desire, and that was that she might sleep, that she might slip away from all that was active and sorrowful, even from all which might be tender and pleasant, lulled by sleep into forgetfulness of real things.

"I am so tired, Barker," she said many times; "so tired."

And in this prostration of mind and body she lay in her bed for two days, only rousing herself sometimes to express a wish that some simple little remembrance of her childhood should be included among the things that were to be packed and taken away with her.

Each day the nurses came and reported news of the sick woman, but Christine showed no interest.

"I am too tired to think, too tired to move," was all she said. Once she got hold of her faithful maid's hand and said: "If I could just drift away out of life, Barker."

She had informed Barker that she was waiting for Sir George Narborough's orders as to the arrangements for her future.

"We are to be married at once; we shall go on the yacht; but you will come with me, Barker, you won't leave me?" she pleaded.

And with tears in her eyes Barker had taken Christine's hand and kissed it many times.

"Do you think it will be so easy to leave you, Miss Christine?" she asked.

Then it was that she had written to Mrs. Dudworth, and she tried to find some happiness in the thought that in a very little while the girl would be taken away from Hunston and would be in her husband's care.

She busied herself, too, in arranging Christine's clothes. If the wedding was going to be very quiet, and the honeymoon a prolonged one on the yacht, the young bride would not want very much in the way of finery for the moment, but Barker took upon herself to give orders for some new garments. Nevertheless, after a while her heart began to misgive her in the strangest way possible.

Mrs. Dudworth wrote back to the maid that she was to be kept informed by telegram of Miss Fielding's movements, for if necessary she would leave Ireland and join the girl.

But Barker could only answer that they were still at Hunston, still waiting for Sir George to write that all was arranged. She went so far as to say that she hoped that Mrs. Dudworth would be with Miss Christine at the time of the wedding.

"She ought to have someone with her," the maid wrote, "someone more than me, I mean."

And to this Mrs. Dudworth replied by telegram that of course she would be with Miss Fielding, that she was only waiting to hear when and where she would be required.

And the days went by.

Anne Dancroft wrote more than one letter to Christine, letters full of enthusiasm, full of hope, full of approaching happiness,

And once Christine wrote back only a few words, thanking Anne for these letters.

The news of Mrs. Dancroft was satisfactory. Each day she improved, still each day her son came down from London and spent a few moments with her. He never asked for Miss Fielding; he never showed the slightest disposition to know what was passing with her, and Casson was most careful not to speak his young mistress's name.

In London there was much to hold Dancroft, to engross him. He flung himself into business with an energy and enthusiasm which surprised even himself. He wanted to do the work of three men. His business instinct, his perceptions, were not long in making themselves felt. He had been merely tolerated at first, but by degrees he was not only appreciated by the men about him, but these same men began to feel that Miss Fielding had not chosen rashly when she had elected to give this outsider a responsible and desirable post.

The life of the City too, had done more than change Dancroft outwardly. It smoothed away the very rough corners. The sense of equality with other men brought out many qualities which he had not known he possessed. Yet though his manner became less abrupt he made a friend of none, the exception perhaps being Mr. Millward. He liked to hear this man speak of Henry Fielding. It gave him a strange sense of satisfaction when Millward would wax enthusiastic about the man who was dead. He felt in such moments as though some little amend was being made to Christine.

Though his sister was back in town, he did not

set her. He had written her one of his characteristic letters, to which Anne had responded in equally characteristic fashion; but he knew what was passing with his sister all the same, and he made it his business to find out all he could about the young doctor with whom Anne hoped to make her future life. When he satisfied himself that there was nothing but good to learn of John Coniston, he stood on one side, as it were.

"Anne is to be envied," he mused once. "Everything is settled with her; she knows where she is going."

Though he never saw Christine, though he never spoke her name, his daily visits to Hunston were becoming little less than torture to Dancroft. The conviction that she was in earnest, the horrible suggestion that perhaps he was driving her, to take a hasty step pressed on his heart all the time. And then all at once there came an end to this state of things.

A telegram was received by James Dancroft in the City one afternoon just as he was about to start on his journey to the country. There was a reply attached to it. The young man frowned as he opened it and read the signature. Telegrams except as matters of business were rare in his life. The message Mrs. Dudworth had sent him was perplexing and even alarming.

"Please let me know if news announced in to-day's paper is really correct. Am dreadfully anxious about Christine. I beg of you to let me know how she is."

At this very moment Mr. Millward sought Dancroft on some important point of business, and acting on a sudden impulse, the young man put Mrs. Dudworth's telegram into Mr. Millward's hands.

"Can you help me to understand this?"

The other man shook his head.

"We had better study the papers," he suggested, and he gave orders that various morning papers were to be brought.

When these came Mr. Millward said:

"The matter must be a social one; therefore, no doubt, it has escaped your notice and mine."

Dancroft said nothing. A strange, cold feeling had passed into his veins, yet with it a sense of something akin to hope; a strange, a wild feeling which made his hands tremble and brought a mist before his eyes.

Suddenly Mr. Millward gave an exclamation.

"Here it is," he said, and then he said: "My God! this is hard!"

He pointed to the paragraph, and James Dancroft took the paper. For an instant he could not see clearly, and then the mist passed away. In a very few words it was announced that the day previously Sir George Narborough had been married to Miss Constance Knox at a certain church in Southampton, and that following immediately on their marriage, Sir George and Lady Narborough had gone on board their yacht the *Flora*, and would be absent for many months.

Mr. Millward paced to and fro in the room uttering incoherent exclamations; but Dancroft stood

like one transfixed. Hope—that strange, wild feeling—had passed from him. His heart was on fire, a veritable madness possessed him; he longed to have his hands round the throat of that other man—that cold, supercilious, good-looking creature whom from the very first he had hated and despised. He longed to bring this man to his feet and put his heel upon him. Those few words she had spoken with such despair out under the trees with the young moon shining upon her rang again and again in Dancroft's ears. She had turned from all which she had tried to bear; she had stretched out her hands for love, for protection, and this was how she was answered!

Mr. Millward awakened at last to the fact that there was something strange in his companion's manner.

"Do you think she knows?" he asked. "What shall we do?

And Dancroft answered in a quiet low voice:

"It is well that he has gone or I would have killed him."

He did not realize nor care that the other man was looking at him with astonishment in his eyes; he saw nothing, he remembered nothing, but that slender young creature, who had fought so bravely and who had gone under at last, bowed down with the burden he had been instrumental in putting on her shoulders. The pitifulness of her look had never left him. He saw her now again as he had seen her that last time, and the tears came into his eyes at the remembrance. After a while, however, he roused himself.

"She must have someone with her," he said. "Write an answer to this telegram. Mrs. Budworth must come at once."

When he reached Hunston that night he broke through the long spell of silence and he spoke her name.

It was Dr. Brathmore to whom he spoke. It was some consolation to him to hear that Christine was as yet unconscious of what had happened, simply because she was too ill to know anything of what was passing about her.

"If you ask me to give a name to this illness," Dr. Brathmore said, "I'll find you one easily enough; but the real reason, Mr. Dancroft, is that the child has broken down; that the grief and the trouble which began with her father's death have slowly but surely crushed the spirit out of her. She is so prostrated, her vitality is so low, that there are moments when I am not quite sure how things will go with her."

Dancroft put his hands on the other man's shoulder and looked him in the eyes.

"She must not die," he said, hoarsely; "she must not die! There is something she must hear from me before she dies. If she goes I shall feel that I have murdered her. It was I who really caused her father's death. Do you understand what that means? Oh God! Brathmore, she must not die!"

The man who had known Christine ever since she had been a little child was deeply moved. He took Dancroft's two hands in his and grasped them.

"She is young, thank God!" he said; "and though she has had so much to try her, she possesses, of course, the reserve force of the young. If this man's cruel desertion of her can be kept from her, I will do my best to have her out and about again in a little while."

Afterwards, when they were speaking of his mother's condition, James Dancroft asked how soon it would be possible to move Mrs. Dancroft.

He frowned when Dr. Brathmore shook his head.

"Your mother has made an extraordinary recovery, but I don't think we can discuss any move for some time to come," he said; "moreover, bearing in mind her peculiar desire to remain here, and Christine's wish that everything should be done according to your mother's pleasure, I am afraid it is impossible to go into the question of any move." After a little while Dr. Brathmore added: "And I believe that I should be studying Miss Fielding's wishes also by dismissing this question altogether. Whatever the cause which brought your mother here, and however she may have suffered in connection with this, there is no doubt in my mind that Christine Fielding feels very strongly on the subject of your mother remaining here."

Dancroft did not go to his mother after this interview. He felt that the agitation, the excitement, the veritable anguish which he was enduring must make itself manifest, and he had no wish to disturb the sick woman or to subject himself to a further bitter outburst on her part.

He was very restless and paced the hall nervously. There lay on his heart all the time that piercing remorse, that conviction that this breakdown of which Dr. Brathmore had spoken, was the outcome of his return to hostility, of his sudden change from friendship to something akin to enmity. Since she had received no hint of Narborough's desertion there could be no other explanation for Christine's illness.

He refused dinner; to eat was impossible; and whilst he still paced to and fro, Casson brought him a message, stating that Miss Dancroft had telegraphed that she was on her way, and she desired that some carriage should be sent to meet her at the station.

"I will go," said Dancroft.

It was a relief to do something. The swift motion of the motor-car fitted in with the nervous tension of his mood. The brother and sister met in silence; then Anne said:

"I had to come. I didn't hear of it till Enid Coniston told me this afternoon that it was in all the papers. I always thought he was a beast, but I didn't think he was quite as bad as this. I don't suppose I can do any good, still, I thought I'd come," the girl repeated; and then she said: "She has had so much to bear, Jim, I'd like to stand by her now."

James Dancroft could not speak for a moment. His sister's words stirred his heart. The knowledge that Christine's goodness had won this recognition from Anne was touching and almost beautiful.

CHAPTER XXX

DR. BRATHMORE and Mrs. Dudworth combined to treat Christine as though she were a great invalid.

Days went by and became weeks, and still Miss Fielding remained in her room. All business was kept away from her. She was not allowed to receive or write letters. The weather was very hot, and Christine lay on a couch drawn up to the window where she could look out over the familiar and beloved surroundings and doze and dream the hours away. She was very docile. The weakness of which Dr. Brathmore had spoken remained. The girl's spirit seemed to be benumbed. She asked for nothing better than to rest and sleep.

It was reserved for Margaret Dudworth to feel all the anger, the humiliation, the amazement and the pain which George Narborough's hasty and unexpected marriage brought.

He had written a long letter to her, in which he had very quietly stated the position of affairs.

He reminded Mrs. Dudworth that he had repeatedly brought to her notice the fact that he had not been fairly treated by Christine; that he had been kept outside a most important movement

in her life. His advice had been discarded and his dignity not considered.

"Matters came to a crisis," he wrote, "when I last went to Hunston. I then found Christine in a strangely excited mood; she told me that she was resolved to relinquish all that she possessed in favour of these people, the Dancrofts! It is possible she may have spoken with exaggeration, but her manner gave me to understand that she was in earnest. For some time past I have realized that I have not been essential to Christine's happiness, nor do I think that we were in the least likely to be happy together. On the other hand, the woman I have married has been sincerely attached to me for some time. Circumstances arose to leave her alone, and at the same time to throw her upon my protection. I resolved to make her my wife. My firm opinion is that when you sit down and think quietly over the matter, you will be disposed to regard this matter sensibly; at least, I am quite sure Christine will not break her heart."

Mrs. Dudworth did not trouble to reply to this letter, although Sir George gave her an address from whence all communications would be forwarded to him. It was not till some time later that she learnt that the yacht in which he had sailed with his wife had been given to him by Christine only so short a time before his elopement. But, though she did not write to him, she wrote very often to his mother, to whom his marriage came as a shock, and who was grieving at the wrong she felt had been done to Miss Fielding.

Occasionally Mrs. Dudworth and Dr. Brathmore spoke on the subject, but not often. It was impossible, however, to put a check on Anne Dancroft's tongue.

Miss Dancroft flashed backwards and forwards to Hunston Manor very frequently. Although she was not allowed to sit with Christine, she came to satisfy herself that things were going well with the girl; and, of course, she came to see her mother, who was progressing into a tardy convalescence. Anne's remarks about Sir George Narborough were very much to the point. She called him some very hard names, for naturally she, like all the rest of the world, imagined that it was Sir George's departure and his marriage which had reduced Christine to her present weak condition.

"He is the sort of man I should like to shoot," Anne said, "just shoot him, you know, like one would a bird or a rabbit. I don't know what the woman can be like who has gone away with him, but I'm sorry for her. There'll be a bad time for her in the future! It was a sneaky thing to do to go off with a man who was just going to marry another woman. Somebody was telling me that she had been a governess or something like that. I didn't *quite* see Sir George Narborough running away with a governess; but, then, when I heard that this young woman had come into a lot of money, of course it made everything very clear. That fine gentleman has got his head screwed on pretty tightly, I can tell you!"

Margaret Dudworth grew to welcome Anne's

coming. She was so vigorous, so out-spoken; just like Roger speaking out her feelings in frank schoolboy fashion. She attracted because of this frankness and sincerity, even though she might be rough and lacking in manners. Then she had a keen, practical outlook, which commended itself to Mrs. Dudworth. In discussing her future, Anne said once:

"Oh! I know Enid threw me at Jack's head. She wants to get what money I've got into the family. But it won't do her much good, and what she doesn't understand is that Jack would have married me just the same if I hadn't had a penny. I'm going to work with him. I don't want to set up and be fashionable like Enid. All their money goes in show; I want to have a home. I quite expect, by and by, Enid will drop me; I shan't be smart enough." Another time Anne said: "I prepared myself to have all sorts of rows with mother about Jack, but she has taken the engagement very quietly, even though I had to tell her that I made my own terms with Christine Fielding. But then, I don't count for very much with my mother. If she's got any love left for anybody these days she's got it for Jim; she just puts up with me!"

Mrs. Dudworth did not pretend to have any very great sympathy with Mrs. Dancroft, even though the old woman had been so close to death. Indeed, it fretted her to feel that Christine's old home could not be free of the blighting presence of one who was inimical to the girl. She intended as soon as ever Christine could travel to take her away.

Roger came to spend a few days' holiday at Hunston, and he was always urging this move. A great friendship sprang up speedily between the boy and Anne Dancroft, whom he regarded "as a real good sort." His mother, however, could make no definite plans for Christine yet. She found her only happiness in nursing the girl back to health, and in lavishing all sorts of tender thought and care upon her. She gave up all other engagements so that she might remain with Christine.

The summer wore away slowly, yet not unpleasantly. When she could dismiss from her mind that there was an alien influence in the house, Mrs. Dudworth found the purest enjoyment and charm in the peaceful and beautiful surroundings. She realized now even better than she had done in the past why this old country place had been so dear to Henry Fielding, and even more she realized how difficult it would be to uproot Christine from this old house where she had lived all her young life. Indeed, as the girl gradually drifted back to health and strength, the question of going away seemed to recede into the background. For, in truth, one might travel far and still never find any place so tranquil, so healthy, or so beautiful as Hunston Manor and its many acres of ground and gardens.

Christine had received the news about George Narborough very quietly. Mrs. Dudworth had given her his letter to read when the girl had once again been allowed to receive her correspondence.

Christine had given back the letter in silence, but a little while later she had said :

"There is much that is true in what he has written. It never would have been possible for us to be happy together." Another time she said, with a little smile that was rather pitiful : "You see, Peggy dearest, it was the money he wanted, not me. Still, I wish he had been straightforward with me. It hurts me to think that he ran away from me as though he were afraid of me." Later still she spoke of him again, and this time her face was dyed with colour. "I know now, Peggy," she said, "that I never really loved George, yet there was a moment, just the very last time he came down, when I felt myself turning to him, when I believe I could have loved him if—if he had been what I thought he was."

"We are not going to talk about George any more," Mrs. Dudworth said briskly. "I was horribly angry at first, but now I can think of him quite easily, though not very pleasantly. The person I am sorry for is his mother. She adores him, you see ; the mere fact that he will be absent nearly a year is a great sorrow to her." Then Mrs. Dudworth, to change the subject, spoke about Anne Dancroft, who was just plunging into preparations for her marriage.

"I can't help admiring her spirit, she is so determined to take her opportunity and she is so sensible ; and then I like her, Christine, because she is really fond of you."

These words brought the colour back to Christine's cheeks once more.

"I am glad of that," she said, "more glad than you can possibly understand."

"Yes, Anne is more than satisfied with all you have done for her. I don't want to bother you, darling," Mrs. Dudworth said earnestly, "but I do feel it would be so much wiser if you could bring matters to some such settlement with Mrs. Dancroft. I understand that her son is quite satisfied also, and I hear that he is doing remarkably well. I confess I should feel happier about you, Christine, if your position could be more clearly defined as far as Mrs. Dancroft is concerned. She is an old and a suffering woman; still, she seems to have enormous mental strength. I am afraid she could permanently embitter your life, unless you can arrange matters with her."

Christine's colour receded and her face was white.

"It is so difficult to know how to approach her, so difficult to know what will satisfy her or take away this terrible bitterness. It seems unjust, Peggy, and yet I can't deceive myself. I am sure that Mrs. Dancroft hates me, even as much as she hated my father."

"Dearest," said Mrs. Dudworth, "when people harbour wrongs for so many years they grow out of all sense of proportion or justice. I suppose the fact that you are Henry Fielding's daughter is sufficient for this old woman to hate you."

She paused a moment, and then asked impulsively:

"Shall I approach her for you?"

But Christine said:

"No; I must not shirk this. By and by,"

Christine added, "I shall be stronger, and then I *will* try and bring matters to a settlement."

"Well, I have offered to give Anne a wedding from my house," said Mrs. Dudworth, "and she has accepted this offer. It will not be a grand affair, but at the same time she wants to have a bridal gown, so we will try and make it a little festivity. Dr. Brathmore thinks that it would do you no harm to come to London for a little while, and I know Anne has set her heart on having you at her wedding."

"I will gladly go," Christine said, "and I will gratify my dear patient Barker and wear one of my new gowns for the occasion; but I must come back here, Peggy. Until I know what Mrs. Dancroft's wishes are, I shall never feel that my life belongs to myself."

Anne flashed down upon them that very afternoon, and was in radiant spirits. She looked very handsome, and her happiness was almost infectious. Her gratitude to Christine for promising to be at her wedding brought tears to the other girl's eyes. When they were alone, Anne impulsively stretched out her hand.

"You know by rights you ought to hate me," she said, "because I was such a beast when I came here, and we've all made your life so wretched. But I don't want you to hate me—I want you to try and care for me. Jack has told me so much about you when you were a little child, and so much about your father, too. I haven't even told him, Christine, why it is that I have had all this money from you; he thinks, as Enid does, that it

is because we are relations; and so I never stop him when he speaks of your father. Indeed, I am glad to listen."

Anne paused just a moment; then she stooped and kissed Christine; then abruptly she spoke about her brother.

"You know that Jim means to go abroad?" she said. "He is going in the place of some other man out to the East."

"No," said Christine in a low voice; "I know this was proposed, but I did not know it was decided." Then she added: "I have not seen your brother since—since I have been ill."

"Well, he comes down here very often," said Anne; "but he is very queer, is Jim. We've made up our quarrel, though he did say horrid things to me, and he has met Jack, and I think they like one another. But I never see him; I don't know what he does with himself. I shouldn't be surprised if he was working—studying, you know. He is really very clever; but, of course, he never had a proper education. He picked up a few languages travelling about, but they don't amount to much."

"And you are going to be married very soon?" Christine said hurriedly, to change the subject.

"Yes—three weeks from now," said Anne. "Jack couldn't get a holiday before. We are going abroad to Switzerland, and perhaps to Italy. Sometimes I can't believe all this has come to me! I used to want things so badly—oh! so badly! I never, never thought I'd get all I've got now!"

It was after this visit of Anne's that Christine allowed herself to be persuaded to go to London. James Dancroft came down the evening before she went. He did not see her, but Mrs. Dudworth dined with him and gave him such news as she had.

Just as Anne attracted her in one way, so this young man attracted her in another. He had always been quiet, but there was a difference. Once he had been morose; now he was only reserved. And his silence had none of the old sullenness. Mrs. Dudworth found him astonishingly improved both in look and in bearing, and when they talked on general subjects his conversation was interesting.

She noticed, however, that he did not seem to wish to hear about Miss Fielding or her plans. It was, therefore, with a little hesitation that Mrs. Dudworth spoke to him on the subject which she had so much at heart.

"I am taking Christine away to-morrow, Mr. Dancroft," she said, "and she will remain with me till after your sister's wedding. Then she tells me that she must come back here. I know what is in her heart—she wishes to come to a thorough understanding with your mother, and I am more than anxious that this should be brought about. Will you promise me that you will do all you can to help the situation?"

"Yes," Dancroft answered quietly. He paused a moment, and then he added: "But I can't promise that I can be of any real service. My mother is a strange woman, and I, who know her

better perhaps than anyone else, and really in ignorance as to what is working in her mind with regard to Miss Fielding. I should have thought she might have been satisfied, but I see that though she has been so ill, and though she is very broken in health, she is absolutely unchanged in her attitude towards Miss Fielding's father, and I am afraid towards Miss Fielding herself."

"Still, Mr. Dancroft, we must protect this child," said Mrs. Dudworth. "She has done all she possibly can."

"A long time ago," James Dancroft said, "I—I told her that she could have refused to do anything, but you can't change her nature. She chooses to regard my mother's claim as something stronger and deeper than an ordinary one. I think that the wrong done in the beginning has gone into her very heart. From what happened that day at the office she has shown us that she is as much actuated now in studying our wishes as she was in the beginning in her determination to protect her father's good name; so, you see, she puts herself to a certain extent at the mercy of my mother."

"Still," argued Mrs. Dudworth, "your mother is old; there is little more that she can exact from Christine. She shares the girl's home, she shares everything that Christine has, or, rather, Christine would be ready to give her all that she will ask—surely this ought to move her? It is the knowledge that so hostile an influence lives so close to her which has worked such a havoc in the girl's heart and mind and body."

James Dancroft did not speak for a moment; then he said in a low voice:

"All that I can do I will. More than that it is impossible for me to promise."

In London Mrs. Dudworth set herself to work to bring back to Christine some, at least, of that bright spirit which once had been so characteristic of her, and she succeeded far better than she had hoped. It would perhaps have astonished the elder woman could she have known what a vast sense of relief Christine felt in the realization that she was free—free, that is, to look ahead and try to dream out her future without reference to George Narborough. She did not deny to herself that the man's desertion of her had been a shock, and a peculiarly cruel one coming at the time it did and in such a way; nor did she forget how in some of her darkest moments she had turned instinctively to this man, trying to find solace and even happiness in the remembrance of his often protested affection; but these were things of the past, and there was something almost beautiful to Christine to feel that she owed no bond to anyone; that save for that duty which she had to fulfil for her father's sake her pathway lay straight ahead, and she might make of her life what she liked. Then, too, the youth in her turned naturally to share in the really radiant contentment which possessed Anne Dancroft.

Christine was far more in sympathy with this girl than she was with her old friend Enid Conston. She found it really delightful to go about with Anne, to help her buy clothes, to go down and

watch the workmen transforming the modest little home which Jack Coniston had occupied as a bachelor into something more worthy of a mistress.

Anne, in her sensible fashion, had refused to let this home be changed. It was nothing to her that the neighbourhood was crowded and poor; that no one for streets around possessed a carriage or even a servant. Her husband was to work his way to fortune, and she was going to help him.

"We don't intend to live up to our income," she said; "we are going to save each year."

And, of course, Christine found many little ways in which to help the small establishment which was being prepared. In such a homely and natural atmosphere, the miserable and unhappy tumult of thought which had beset her so long had little opportunity of claiming her. In truth, she was eager to forget all that was dark and saddening for a time, at least.

The bride elect was a very busy person, but found time to think closely about Christine and even to worry about her.

"I tell you what," she said, on one of the few occasions when she and her brother met, "I'm fearfully keen on letting that hound know he hasn't quite finished her life. She's got to marry someone swell, Jim, you know, a real big sort of person. Mrs. Dudworth knows heaps of the right sort. I'd like Christine to have a wedding now right away. A great flare up sort of affair, and then I'd send him all the papers myself and let him see

he isn't the only man in the world. She could marry anybody," Anne declared with affectionate pride, "and you know that quite well."

"I don't know anything about it," Dancroft said; but though he spoke indifferently, he smiled faintly. "You've got marriage on the brain, Anne," he added.

Anne laughed, and then she grew grave.

"Anyhow," she said, "she's stood enough, and if you won't tackle mother and make things better for Christine, I shall do it when I get back."

"I advise you to leave this business alone," Dancroft said; and as Anne had no wish to quarrel, the subject was dropped.

It was at the wedding itself that Dancroft and Miss Fielding met again.

Barker had been allowed a free hand for once, and Christine wore an exquisite gown. She was in white from head to foot, and her appearance startled the man. He had never seen her with smiles on her lips and a light in her eyes. He had never seen her in dainty clothes; and now in her filmy gown and her soft plumed hat she seemed a creature altogether apart from the sad, subdued, black-robed girl whom he had watched so often walking under the trees at Hunston.

They did not speak to one another, though at the time of the ceremony they stood side by side. A great chasm seemed to have been stretched between them. The change in their outward look symbolized that change which had been worked in their two lives.

Just as he looked at Christine, seeing her as

though she were a stranger, so the girl felt that she had no acquaintance with this man, so grave in his rigorously conventional garb, so quiet in manner, so devoid of all emotion.

Mrs. Dudworth took his arm as they were passing out of the church.

"I saw you looking at Christine," she said. "How do you find her? I think and hope that she is quite strong again."

"She looks very well," Dancroft said.

The words were very commonplace, but it was only in commonplace words that he could speak of her.

"She is leaving me to-morrow or next day," said Mrs. Dudworth, "and I part from her with the greatest possible reluctance; still, I am happier about her than I was, and even though she is going back to Hunston, I am in great hopes that she will not be depressed or upset. I should like you to be there when she sees your mother! Can you manage this?"

He said: "Yes."

He still had something uncompromising in his manner, but Mrs. Dudworth had grown to understand him, and she appreciated the sincerity which was in him perhaps even more fully developed than it was in his sister. He only waited until the bride and bridegroom had departed, then he left; but before going he approached Christine.

"I hear you are leaving London directly," he said, "and that you intend to return to Hunston?"

Christine said: "Yes, I am going back to-morrow."

There was a pause, then Dancroft said abruptly: "If you have need of me will you let me know?"

She smiled, and the smile hurt him. There was something cold in it, as assuredly her voice was cold.

"I don't think I shall have any need of you, Mr. Dancroft," she said.

Their eyes met, and Christine, with anger, felt the blood rush to her face. It was impossible that they could forget their last meeting. Upon the man there came, indeed, a sense of burning shame when he recalled the almost brutal words he had spoken and realized how quickly George Narborough had made his prophecy true.

"Perhaps you may not want me," he said, with something of his old manner; "still, if you should do so, please understand I am at your service."

He did not touch her hand, but he looked at her once again, and the strength in his eyes brought hers to his for the space of an instant; then, colouring hotly again, Christine Fielding turned away, and when she looked around he was gone.

The evening was spent quietly by Mrs. Dudworth and herself, and the day following, Barker and she went back to Hunston.

Christine kissed her cousin warmly as they parted.

"You are not to fret about me, Peggy," she said. "I mean to be very strong in future. And when I have done what I feel I must do, perhaps I shall be able to come back to you. In any case, we shall be together very often."

It surprised Mrs. Dudworth to realize that she

parted with the girl with far more tranquillity of mind than she would have imagined could have been possible a little while before. As for Christine, she found herself turning towards her old home with almost the old delight with which she had been wont to go back to it.

Barker was not quite so comfortable. She could not forget so easily all that her young mistress had been called upon to endure at Hunston, neither could she forget all the disagreeable things with which she herself had to contend; however, she intended to meet the future as cheerfully as possible.

"There is one good thing," she said to Miss Fielding as they drove up to the house, "and that is, that horrid old creature Bessie has gone away! Mr. Casson, he wrote to me only a day or two ago, and he said there had been a row between Mrs. Dancroft and Bessie. He didn't know what about, of course, but Mrs. Dancroft had ordered Bessie to pack her box and take herself off, so she won't be there to come along bringing impertinent messages."

"Barker," Miss Fielding said, "I know that you have had to put up with a great deal of annoyance. I am very grateful to you for having borne it for my sake, now I want you to try and be patient a little longer. I told you when first Mrs. Dancroft came to Hunston that I was doing something which my father would have done if he had lived. I am going back because I have not yet carried out all that I had to do. If things do not go so very smoothly try and be patient, won't you?"

"Why, Miss Christine, of course," the maid replied. "I'd like to know who wouldn't be patient if they was serving you!"

Yes, it was very pleasant to be back at Hunston, to be greeted with smiles at the station, to be welcomed by everyone; above all, to walk into the beautiful old house with strength and even with pride; and her own room was so fresh and the smell of the country was like the greeting of an old friend.

Christine dined alone, and that same sense of pleasure rested upon her. All the shadows and the phantoms which had darkened her path in the past seemed to have been swept away.

It was whilst she was at dinner that Casson brought her the information that Mr. Dancroft had arrived. The girl sat silent for an instant with the hot colour rushing to her face; then she said, with as much composure as she could muster:

"Did you tell Mr. Dancroft I was dining? Please ask him to join me."

Casson was absent a minute or two. When he came back he announced that Mr. Dancroft had gone to his room.

"He begged me to thank you, miss, but to say that he had dined. I didn't know that he was coming to-night," Casson added; "as a rule, he lets us know. He has been down here pretty frequently since you've been away. Will you have coffee in the hall, miss?"

Christine said:

"Yes."

She seated herself in the big arm-chair close to

the fire, for the September evening was chilly; and she sipped her coffee, keeping her eyes nervously on the staircase. It was the first time to her knowledge that Dancroft had stayed all night at Hunston. The effect of his presence in the house was disquieting; it made her heart thrill, it made her nervous. She waited for him, scarcely conscious that she waited; but the clock ticked on and struck ten, and then Christine knew that he had no intention of seeking her. After a little while she rose and went slowly up the stairs.

"He has come," she said; "that means that I must speak to-morrow."

She shivered a little as she thought of what lay before her in her meeting with his mother; and when she was in her room some of the old wretched feeling rushed back to her—the sense of restlessness, the sense of helplessness, the sense of weariness. She prepared herself for a sleepless night; but later, when she was in bed, she found herself pleasantly separated from the old sense of wretchedness, of weariness and helplessness, and after a little while she drifted into dreams—dreams which were so tranquil and so soothing, that when the morning came Christine was amazed to find how long and how serenely she had slept.

CHAPTER XXXI

MISS FIELDING breakfasted alone. She had prepared herself to meet Mr. Dancroft, but he did not put in an appearance, although Casson had prepared the breakfast-table for two.

The girl could eat very little; she was nervous to such an extent that she even felt ill. His avoidance of her vexed her. Moreover, the nearer the time drew for her to approach his mother the surer was the feeling of fear which the old woman inspired.

It was now many weeks since she and Mrs. Dancroft had met. Though Christine had never failed before leaving for town to inquire daily at the sick-room, she had never ventured inside it.

A telegram which Casson brought her at that moment gave her a thrill of pleasure. It was from Anne. Such a happy message, full of such sound, healthy contentment.

Christine gave a sigh; with a little natural pang of envy she contrasted her own life with this other young woman's.

As she passed out of the dining-room she met James Dancroft. He was coming downstairs. She held out the telegram to him.

"Perhaps you would like to see this."

He took it and read it, but he did not smile. His face wore a very sombre look.

"May I speak to you?" he asked.

Christine said "Yes" hurriedly.

She led the way back into the dining-room, and he closed the door.

"It is your intention, I believe, to speak definitely to my mother—to bring matters to some settlement as regards yourself and herself, is it not?"

Christine bent her head.

"Yes, I have sent to ask if she will see me. I feel, and my cousin feels, that it is impossible for me to go on living as I am living now. I don't know, of course, what Mrs. Dancroft may wish me to do, but I am fully prepared to meet her if it lies in my power to do so."

He paused a moment, then he said:

"Of course, I have no right to advise you, still I should be glad if you did not approach my mother to-day. She is very angry about my sister, not so much because Anne is married, as because she feels that in starting her new life Anne has worked so independently, and for this, of course, she blames you."

Christine laughed rather faintly.

"I am sure you do not imagine that I should expect to receive kindness from your mother, Mr. Dancroft. I am prepared for everything that is unkind and bitter and even cruel."

"But are you strong enough to meet this?"

She moved away from him proudly.

"It is not a question of strength," she said,

"it is a question of duty. At least, the burden is not as heavy as it was. Anne is satisfied. You have declared that you want nothing more than you now have; there only remains your mother to be considered. If I go to her fully prepared to concede to anything that she may ask, the matter is very simple."

"But you have no right to do this," Dancroft said roughly. "I am as ignorant as you are as to what is working in my mother's mind, but I am afraid that I cannot disguise from myself that ill as she is, and old, the remembrance of her old cause for grievance has not abated: her desire to punish you for your father's wrong-doing is as strong as ever. It is because of this that I want to ask you to permit me to be present at this interview."

Christine shrugged her shoulders.

"Come if you like, but please do not forget that only a little while ago you took back the friendship you had offered me, you repudiated the kindness you showed me." There was a tinge of bitterness in her voice as she added: "I should prefer to deal with Mrs. Dancroft alone."

"I shall not interfere," the young man said. He had turned very pale. "But for every reason I feel that I must be present."

"As you will," said Christine.

She spoke with apparent calmness, but as a matter of fact she was far from being calm. The nervousness and irritation had left her, but she was conscious of being disturbed. She shrank from the gaze of his eyes, she recoiled from that

sense of strength, of dominating influence which his close presence always signified.

A tap at the door and the entrance of the nurse ended this little interview.

"Mrs. Dancroft is ready to see Miss Fielding now," she said.

Christine thanked the nurse, who disappeared, and she moved across to the door. Before she reached it James Dancroft stood across her path.

"You spoke very bitterly just now. I know I've given you the right to think hard things, and that I utterly lost your sympathy the last time that we were here together. Still, I've something to ask you: it is this, that you will set me absolutely apart from anything which my mother may say to you, that you will understand that whilst I am loyal to her I—I can't go with her. In fact, the whole business has become so horrible to me that I have decided to go away; I am going to set myself free from even indirect association with any further persecution of you."

He paused an instant as though he would have said more, then turned abruptly and opened the door for her to pass out. He followed her closely up the stairs. Just before they reached Mrs. Dancroft's room he touched her hand.

"Promise me," he said, in a low voice, "promise me that you will try and forgive her if—if she hurts you very much."

Christine was conscious of a wild beating at her heart, of a sense of confusion that made her tremble, yet which robbed her of that oppressive fear.

"I promise," she said.

The next moment she was within the sick-room.

Her first sensation was one of shock. The little old woman sitting in the chair which was pulled close up to the window looked so feeble. Everything about her was shadowy except those dark eyes, which still burned fiercely. As she drew nearer, however, Christine saw that the spirit, that relentless, indomitable spirit, was as strenuous as ever. Very gently the girl spoke to the old woman.

"I am glad you are better," she said, "glad to know that you are not suffering."

The old woman's lips curled.

"I suppose," she said, "I must accept that as sincere."

The sneer brought the colour to Christine's face. Mrs. Dancroft looked at her steadily.

"Though I may seem better to you," she said, "there is always suffering for me."

Then she looked at her son.

"Jim, you can leave us."

But he shook his head and pushed forward a chair towards Christine.

"No," he said, "I will stay."

"I am indeed blessed in my children, their obedience and consideration is so remarkable," said Mrs. Dancroft, with a bitterness which made Christine wince. "Stay, then, if you must!"

And he stayed.

Then she turned to Christine.

"You have something to say to me; what is it?"

The girl sat down and bit her lip to stop its quivering, and then looked at the wasted old face.

"I want," she said, "I am very anxious to bring matters to a settlement between us, Mrs. Dancroft."

"Why? You have worked your way with my daughter Anne; you have done your best to make a fool of my son! What need of settlement between you and me?"

"Every need," Christine answered. "The present condition of life is impossible. It is intolerable. You reproach me with having given Anne what she asked; but if she is satisfied why should you be angry? With Mr. Dancroft I have no influence one way or another. He has chosen his own path. For yourself I have tried," Christine's voice trembled, "indeed, I have tried to meet you in every way possible. Now, for your sake and my own, I think it desirable that we should bring things to a climax and understand just exactly where we are placed."

"And does my son agree to that?"

The old woman turned to Dancroft, a sneer curling her lip.

He answered her quietly:

"Yes."

The mother looked at him steadily for a moment.

"Very well, then, the position lies in my hand. You are waiting for me to state what terms I exact from you to satisfy my just claim. Listen to me. There is no question of satisfaction. Though you might give me every penny you have—though you might be turned adrift in the world and everyone's finger would be pointed at you in scorn—at you and your sainted father—

that would never give back to me what I have lost, the husband whom I adored—that would never take away the unutterable anguish of a mother who has seen her children die literally for want of food. Satisfaction! I do not look for satisfaction—I only look for justice."

There was not a drop of blood in Christine Fielding's face; she had turned white to the lips. It seemed to her that these few terse words brought before her eyes a picture of such mental and moral suffering that everything which had come was made reasonable; everything she might do, seemed too poor to make atonement.

"Call it by any name you like," she said in a low, clear voice, "only understand that I recognize you have this claim, and that there is nothing I will not attempt to meet it."

The man standing at the back of her chair trembled. He had no need to hear such a sentence fall from her lips; he knew it so well. Unconsciously, he looked at his mother imploringly, but the old face was set as hard as ever, the eyes had no softness in them, the sneer still circled her thin lips.

"That being the case," she said drily, "I shall not detain you very long. I have only to state my wishes, dictate in fact what I expect to be done—and you will agree."

Christine breathed "Yes" rather than said the word. Against herself she was trembling. That nervous excited feeling pressed all the time on her heart, undermining her courage.

Mrs. Dancroft was silent a moment. She moved

the silken coverlet which rested on her knees; she looked at her thin worn hands.

"I am old," she said, breaking the silence quickly. "Money means nothing to me. I have come to that age when one realizes how pitifully poor the greatest of earthly possessions can be; therefore I shall not rob you of your fortune, Christine Fielding! I have never known luxury, nor grandeur, nor do these things appeal to me, so I shall give you back your home. A little place in the old country where I used to live, close to the grave of the man whom your father's wickedness murdered, a shelter over my head and a few shillings to buy flowers for that grave, or to put bread in the mouths of some of those who need it; that is enough for me, as far as I myself go; but that does not meet the case." She lapsed into silence, and, leaning back in her chair, closed her eyes for an instant. Then she began speaking again, this time more slowly, with a note of wistfulness in her voice. "My husband loved his work, as perhaps you have been told, over-well, but he loved his children even more. He was ambitious for them; he dreamed dreams for them. He wanted money, not as the world wants it, but to put his boys face to face with life, to see them rise, to help them and to help the boys of others. His was a noble soul! A mind and heart so beautiful that the world was the better whilst he was in it. This morning the only son that is left to me, told me that he was going away from England. I did not think I could know the meaning of fresh suffering; but it hurts me, oh! it hurts me to lose you, Jim. I don't want

to die whilst you are very far away. It is foolish, perhaps, to care what happens when one is dead, but I want you to follow me to the grave. I want you to see me put beside your father. And this is where you, Christine Fielding, are going to help me! What I do not want for myself I demand for my son—half of all you possess—a share in your home—and my husband's name given at last to everything which should have belonged to him. You understand?" She was sitting bolt upright now, and her eyes were fixed on the girl's face. "My terms are," she said clearly, deliberately, "that you shall be my son's wife?"

It was the man who spoke hurriedly.

"Mother!" he said.

But his voice was so choked with feeling the word hardly passed beyond a whisper.

Christine sat like one stunned. She felt those dark burning eyes searching her; but stronger than this, more penetrating, was the feeling of that dominating influence of the man so near her, that power at once so strong yet so sweet. Just for an instant she felt bound as though by invisible cords, movement was impossible; the next instant, however, she was on her feet. She had seen the little figure in the arm-chair sink back feebly; she had felt the fierceness of the eyes fade from her. It was she who laid the old woman gently on her pillows.

"Call the nurse," she said; "your mother has fainted."

And then, as the nurse hastened into the room, Christine went from it. Hurriedly, like a child

running from something fearful, she passed down the stairs through the old hall out into the gardens, and when she reached her favourite spot under the trees she flung herself into one of the chairs and, leaning back, she closed her eyes. There was such a confusion of thought in her brain she did not know for a little while what was passing with her; then remembrance came, and with it a hot rush of colour to her cheeks. All she had expected, but not this! For all she was prepared, but this found her absolutely unprepared! And the strangest part of the matter was that though there was confusion, though her heart was in a very tumult, there was no anger, neither was there fear. Indeed, as she sat there, looking with unseeing eyes on the beautiful landscape veiled in the bright cold autumn sunshine, a dream fell upon her and her mind began to picture a vision of the future. Nothing was tangible; indeed, all was formless, and yet all was permeated with golden light, with a sense of love, a glorious sense of protection. She seemed to feel a new existence open out about her, a life in which she moved, guided by the hand of another, a life shared by a trusted companion, a life more beautiful because deeper and filled with more purpose than the old happy childhood she had mourned so much. She was lying spell-bound by these visions when Dancroft found her. In fact, she sat quite still, not even moving when he reached her. Then she opened her eyes with a start and looked at him in dazed fashion for a little while till memory brought that hot colour back into her cheeks again. Her first question was of his mother.

"She over-exerted herself—the emotion was too much for her," he said.

He paced a few yards away and then came back again.

"I wonder if I dare speak to you?"

Christine paused an instant; then answered:

"Why not?"

He put his hand to his brow.

"I have had a shock," he said. "I—I hardly know what words to use. I only want you to feel—to be assured that I was absolutely ignorant of what my mother intended to do."

"I do not think it necessary that you should say this to me. So much you vouched for before I went to see your mother," Christine said softly.

The dream had passed away—the vision had vanished. The warmth of the sunshine had gone with them; life was stealing back again in its commonplace form.

He said nothing; he looked at her very steadily.

Christine got up hurriedly.

"I forgot that it is no longer summer," she said. "It is chilly sitting here."

She moved to go back to the house, but he put out his hand.

"Don't go!" he said. "This must be settled between us. Doubtless it has very little significance to you beyond a very natural repugnance to such a compact; but for me it is different. Yes—for me it is altogether different."

CHAPTER XXXII

HE went on speaking almost at once.

"You remember the first night I came here—I loved you then," he said. "When you came into the room and broke upon that horrible interview with your father, my heart went out to you absolutely, and later, that same night, when I—I helped to bring him back, and you fell into my arms, your courage, your strength, your very life itself beaten out of you by such overwhelming sorrow, I had one moment of fullest joy, for I held you close to my heart—you whom I loved—you whom I had learnt to love so swiftly, yet so surely. It—it will very likely sound strange, foolish, untrue, even impossible, to you, especially when you remember all that has happened since. Yet it is just the simple truth—a truth which has given me more suffering than you could ever imagine!"

Christine was standing with her face averted from him. His hand was on her arm, and he felt her move a little way from him. Unconsciously his hold strengthened; he drew her back towards him.

"I tell you this," he said, "not for any other reason but to let you understand, if I can, how my mother's proposition has shocked me. Though I have been rough and rude, brutal even at times, in my manner with you, I have never ceased to study how I could protect, how I could stand between you and the duty you had set yourself. If my mother had only spoken to me—if she had only shown me what she had in her mind, I could at least have prevented this."

As he spoke he loosened his hold. Christine moved away from him and sat in the chair again.

"Don't go," she said, when she felt that he was walking away. As he paused she looked up at him.

"By this time we have surely learnt that we have to face our difficulties sooner or later. So we really serve no purpose by running away from this one?"

He came back and stood very near to her, so near that he brought to her once again that thrilling sensation that was half fear and half joy.

"If you will only tell me you don't hate me for this, I shall be ready to talk out the matter. It will be a bit hard to convince my mother that she has made a big mistake, but it can be done, I think, with time and patience."

Christine moved restlessly under the steady gaze of his eyes. She got up again and stood beside him.

"Of course you know, as I know, that Mrs. Dancroft is no easy person to convince one way or another. Besides," she caught her breath

and then she blushed hotly, "besides, I am not sure," she paused hesitatingly, and as she spoke on her words came in rather stumbling fashion, "I am not sure that—that your mother has not put before us the one solution of this problem," she said under her breath.

He caught her by both arms, holding her in almost painful grip. Slowly he drew her round.

"You've got to speak clearer than that," he said.

She smiled and sighed at the same time.

"What I mean is—I—I should feel," she said in a low voice, "that I really had made atonement, full and complete, if you were master of all that my father once had, if everything which belonged to him should bear your name." She paused an instant, then she said, "That would indeed be justice!"

"I don't want justice now," Dancroft said almost in his old rough way, "I want life, I want love, I want happiness.

"We are not thinking of ourselves," said Christine, with that faint smile again; "we are only puppets working out your mother's will."

"No, by God!" he answered her. "I am no puppet, nor will I give obedience to my mother's will unless you can tell me with all truth and all sincerity that this future together would mean a certain contentment for you."

She did not answer him immediately. Freeing one arm, she put her hand over her eyes and closed them.

"I would rather," she said, when she did speak, her voice very unsteady, "I would rather you

decided that. I think I am tired of being independent, tired of being strong and proud. Like you, I—I want life, and sometimes I dream of being happy."

"And love?" he said, in a low voice; "have you no need of love?"

She took her hand from him and moved away; and as he followed her and came up to her she said:

"I am afraid of love. I think I could suffer through love. I believe that love can be very cruel."

His face flamed hot.

"Is it because of that man, that cur—that you say this?" he asked her passionately.

She answered him with almost the same passion.

"No—no, I never loved him! When he first spoke to me he took me unawares; I had liked him—I had seen so few men. He seemed so real—and I was really only a child then, but now—now I am a woman. I grew suddenly into a woman that dark, awful night when my father died, and I understood almost at once how foolish I had been, what a mistake I had made! Over and over again this last year I have tried to separate myself from him."

"And yet," said Dancroft, in that same passionate tone, "and yet I saw you together. Here, on this very spot, I saw him take you in his arms—I saw him kiss you."

She covered her face with her hands; the flush extended to her throat.

"Oh!" she said; "there were moments when

I think I was mad—when everything about me was so terrible I turned where I could for comfort. I—how can I make you understand? I did not want his kisses—I only wanted the sense of love, the feeling that there was someone to think for me, someone to take care of me—someone to be to me the comfort my father had always been."

He took her hands away from her face and he looked into her eyes.

"Will you have me to take care of you—to protect you—to fill your father's place—will you have me, Christine, to be in truth and in fullest meaning your husband?"

Christine closed her eyes an instant and then she opened them again. She paused, and the colour ebbed and flowed in her face. Then she smiled at him.

"Yes," she said, simply.

THE END.

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